Why the Sunday shows tilt right

# Washington MONTHLY

WINTER BOOKS ISSUE

# All the President's Enablers

In the second year of Bush's second term, former officials and journalists are already writing the history of his administration. The story isn't pretty.

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JAMES CARVILLE & PAUL BEGALA: HOW TO ABRAMOFF-PROOF POLITICS

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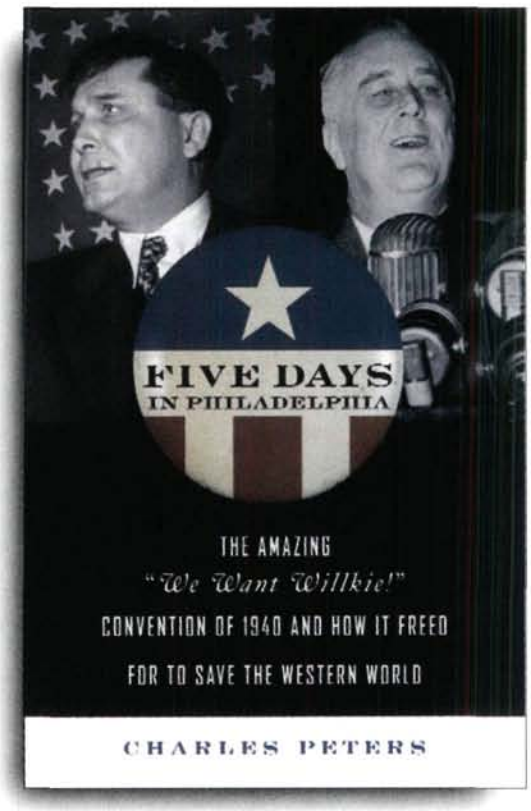


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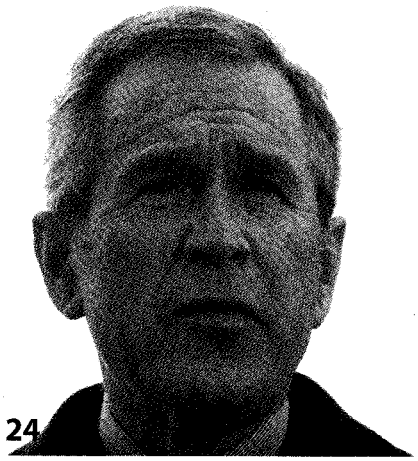
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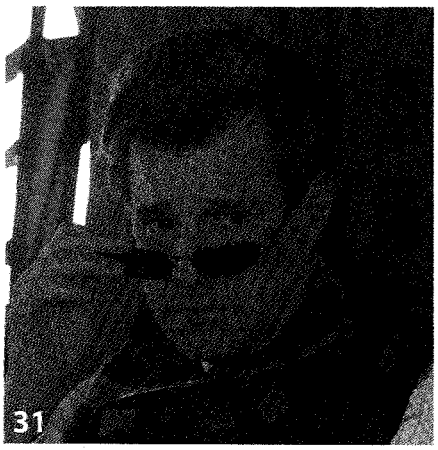
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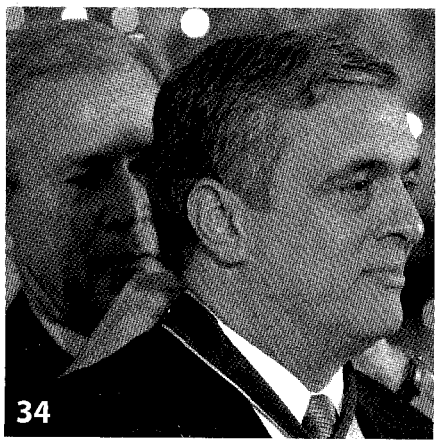
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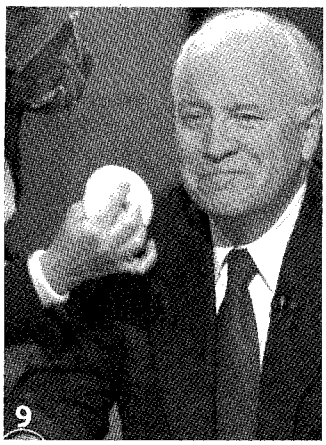


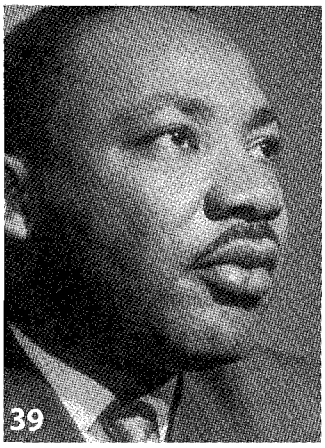


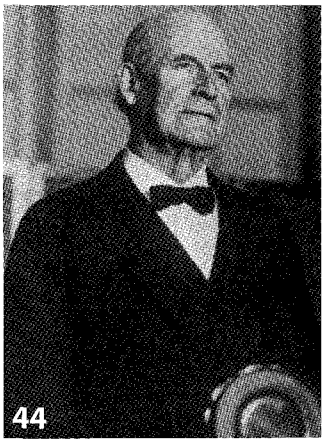

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# Letters

## Stolen Identity

Kevin Drum's article ("You Own You," December 2005) provides a number of commonsense approaches for combating identity theft. At the same time, it fails in one crucial regard. Specifically, it fails to even mention the fact that the GOP-controlled Congress changed the law governing Credit Reporting Bureaus (CRBs), when it significantly amended the Fair Credit Reporting Act (15 USC 1681 et seq.).

On Jan. 1, 2004, the so-called amended Fair and Accurate Credit Transactions Act went into effect. Within the amendments, Congress essentially gave the CRBs immunity from any liability for their actions under state law. I know, because I was preparing to file a class action suit on behalf of the victims of identity theft under state law negligence theories, in the event that the act failed to pass into law. Congress dashed our hopes by specifically preempting CRBs from liability under state law, and so watered down the federal remedies as to render them useless. So much for the GOP's "small government federalists." Any advice to Democrats seeking to distinguish themselves from their GOP counterparts, such as those in Mr. Drum's article, should make this information the central argument, rather than excluding it entirely.

December 2005

Parenthetically, I note this is not the only place where the GOP has eviscerated state remedies and passed federal laws that do little to protect consumers. The so-called CAN SPAM act provides another shining example of how the GOP-controlled Congress stepped in and destroyed through preemption any consumer remedies under state law, while at the same time making the federal law completely ineffective. If you don't believe it, ask yourself how effective CAN SPAM has been in stopping spam from going to your inbox.

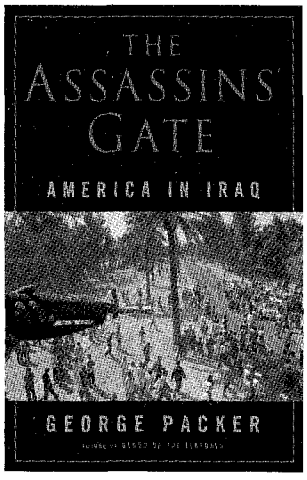
**Douglas E. McKinley, Jr.**
Richland, Washington

## Extra Credit

Good article about revamping current credit-card practices


The Washington Monthly's
**2005 Annual Political Book Award Winner**

**The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq**
**by George Packer**
*Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26*




Wars make for dramatic journalism, but there is a reason this is the first truly great book of the Iraq war. Packer has chosen the right theme: how the abstractions in the heads of the war's proponents—brooding neocons, detail-allergic Bush officials, liberal intellectuals eager to advance the cause of humanitarian intervention—fell apart in the difficult realities of an actual invasion. Having roamed all of the war's fronts—from the battlefields of Baghdad to the conference halls of Washington think tanks—Packer encountered the full range of the war's players. And he carves his characters sharply—an Iraqi coroner, a brainy, high-minded American lieutenant, the pro-war liberal thinker Paul Berman. He uses these figures to craft a gripping narrative that manages to present, painfully but unflinchingly, the war's essential question: Was it worth it? Packer, who started out an aggressive pro-war liberal himself, ends with a deeply ambivalent answer. That in itself speaks volumes about the great difficulty, in 2005, of mounting a real intellectual defense of the Iraq war.

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("Taking Charge" by Robert Gordon and Derek Douglas, December). However, I did not see any mention about giving consumers control over how their payments are allocated when customers have cash advances, purchases and promotionals on their statement. Most credit-card companies allocate the payment to the most recent debt (or the debt with the lowest interest rate). I feel that consumers should be allowed to tell the credit-card companies how they want their debt paid off without a song and dance about company policies prohibiting this.

**Mark Foye**
via email

## Pro-Choice

Paul Glastris writes: "With his Social-Security private-accounts proposal, the president was in essence offering voters a variety of ways to have less retirement security" ("Bush's Ownership Society," December 2005). But this really isn't true, especially for younger people. The way Social Security stands now, it's beyond a mere risk that I won't see much of a return for my "investment." It's a certainty. It would be difficult not to do better privately than the effective rate of return on my large Social Security tax, especially if the Washington solution ends up being to raise the Social Security tax even more.

I'd rather take the risk of investing my own money and having an asset that I own. Social Security is a rip-off for most people, and will only get to be more so as the demographics change to a lower worker-retiree ratio.

I also find it amusing—and telling—that in one breath Glastris writes about delivering on individual choice: "Liberals are in a much better ideological position to actually deliver on the demand for more individual control and choice. The only obstacle is realizing that liberal policy goals can be advanced by smart proposals that let citizens make their own decisions." And then he concludes with advocating forced "choice" in health insurance, education, and retirement. That's an oxymoron if I've ever heard one.

This is the classic paternalistic and arrogant leftist mindset—let's force people to do what we think is best for them—and it's revolting. When do you let the children grow up and learn to be self-sufficient?

**David Andersen**
Via email

## Who's Bad?

I am disappointed to see the founding editor comment unfavorably on Justice Roberts's willingness to serve as attorney for "the bad guys" ("Tilting at Windmills," by Charles Peters, December 2005). It is obvious that with overzealous toadies such as our current Attorney General in place we may need protection from the "good guys."

We need to have the bad guys get a stout defense to prevent reckless unprepared DAs obtaining convictions that will be reversed. The current tendency to be overwhelmed by obviously arbitrary moral judgments such as Peters's on Roberts is misplaced in the purportedly fact-based reporting goals of *The Washington Monthly*. Stout defense of the worst makes the state do its job by the standards of proof Peters would want should someone bring a charge of moral relativism against *The Washington Monthly*.

**Joseph Crayhon**
via email



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# Tilting at **Windmills**

by **Charles Peters**

### Yeah, but his prediction *was* wrong

You will recall that Lawrence Lindsay, President George W. Bush's first chief economic advisor, was reprimanded and ultimately fired for daring to suggest that the Iraq war could cost as much as $200 billion. The latest estimate of the actual cost—from no less an authority than the Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz: $2 trillion.

### Next stop the Food Network

Some friends have complained that when they tune into the ESPN sports channels expecting to find football, basketball, and baseball games, instead, late every afternoon (and often at other times), they find a bunch of guys sitting around a poker table. The most strenuous athletic effort involved seems to be shuffling the cards. I then discovered that on the Travel Channel, where you might expect to see Tahitian islands, Roman ruins, or Parisian boulevards, you will find still another poker show. It's called "Celebrity Poker Tours." I guess "tours" makes it qualify as travel. ESPN tries to impart an aura of sport to its show by calling it "The World Series of Poker."

### Why they call him a legal golden boy

Karl Rove's lawyer, Robert Luskin, once defended a precious metals dealer accused of laundering millions of dollars in drug money. His fee was paid with 45 gold bars worth $505,000, as well as Swiss wire transfers of $169,000. Luskin found nothing suspicious in this form of payment, but the U.S. Attorney for Rhode Island accused him of "willful blindness," according to *The Washington Post*.

This reminds me of William O. Bittman, an attorney for one of the Watergate defendants, who was unperturbed when told to pick up his fee of $25,000 in cash left in a paper bag in a phone booth.

### So that's what he did with the gold...

One fact about Luskin that I find delightful but that might not elicit a similar reaction from what conservatives lovingly describe as "the base," is that he was the first man to wear an earring while arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court. Then, it was a silver stud; today he wears what the *Post* describes as "a barely noticeable" gold hoop.

### Curiously, Ashcroft doesn't boast about his buddy Jack

It is possible that the Justice Department could have nailed Jack Abramoff several years earlier. In 2002, Frederick Black, a federal prosecutor in Guam where Abramoff had a lobbying practice, notified the Justice Department in Washington that he was investigating Abramoff. Oddly enough, a few days later Black was reassigned by the department and the investigation shut down. The attorney general at the time was John Ashcroft. According to Philip Shenon of *The New York Times*, "Mr. Abramoff's internal email messages show that he boasted to clients about what he described as his close ties to John Ashcroft."

### The filet mignon index

Three of the greatest changes I've seen in Washington in the 45 years I've lived here have involved lobbying. One is the explosive growth in the number of lobbyists that occurred in the 1970s. My guess is that it was originally inspired by the astonishment felt by big business when the growth of regulatory agencies continued even under the Nixon administration, with the enactment of the laws establishing OSHA, the EPA, and the Consumer Products Safety Commission. The subsequent growth in the number of lobbyists manifested itself physically in the boom in construction of posh new office buildings in the area of the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and K Street. As this boom was occurring, we dispatched Nicholas Lemann, then a 23-year-old *Monthly* reporter, to one of the buildings to find out who the tenants were. Two-thirds, it developed, were trade associations and lawyers, terms which may have other meanings elsewhere, but which in Washington are practically synonymous with lobbying.

The takeover of the town by lobbyists was also reflected in restaurant prices. Until the early 70s, the Washington economy was geared to civil servants' salaries, which had traditionally been modest. I could afford to eat at even the best restaurants once a week. By the late '70s, the lobbyists ruled the roost with their credit cards and expense accounts, and I had to become an expert in finding bargain restaurants.

### Career planning

The second change, first identified by our alumnus Steven Waldman in his book, *The Bill*, occurred in the '80s and '90s. Congressional staffers began to aspire to be lobbyists. When I came to Washington, Hill staffers were mostly bright and dedicated to getting their views enacted into law or were politicians who were grateful for the reward of a nice job in Washington. Few talked about becoming lobbyists, but as they saw the bucks the lobby-



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ists were raking in during the '70s and the fancy restaurants they were enjoying that the staffers couldn't afford, the staffers got greedy. And the development that Waldman identified began to occur. Staffers, instead of trying to get their own views into law, were trying to please lobbyists, who might give them lucrative employment on K Street. Understanding this development turned out to be the key to Jack Abramoff's rise to power.

## Pay to play

Abramoff's rise also reflected the third great development in lobbying, which was its Republicanization. In a move that apparently was largely engineered by Grover Norquist and Tom DeLay, the Republicans who gained control of Congress in the 1994 election have increasingly insisted that lobbyists who want access to the Hill be Republicans and raise money for Republican candidates. This has helped solidify Republican congressional majorities. Now it appears that DeLay will get his comeuppance. There also is a chance that Grover Norquist may be in trouble because of his extensive involvement with Abramoff.

Gail Norton, Norquist's partner in founding Citizens for Tax Justice, and now secretary of interior, may also be in trouble. Her former deputy, Stephen Griles, was described by Abramoff as his "man at Interior."

## The Peters fix

What would I do about the lobbying scandal? First, I would forbid all congressional and staff travel other than that paid for by the government or by the individual himself.

Second, I would forbid all fundraising outside of the district or state represented by the congressman or senator. I know some liberals resist this reform because they get money from Hollywood or New York, but it would destroy much of K Street's power. [I also like the approach suggested by James Carville and Paul Begala, beginning on page 14 of this issue.]

Third, I would forbid former congressmen and staff from ever lobbying Congress. There is now a one-year prohibition that is not enforced. But before lobbying became a major industry, these fellows were able to get retirement employment elsewhere, and they can do so again.

Finally, I would find a way to keep spouses of members and staffers from lobbying. I recently ran into a friend who told me she is now chief of staff to a very prominent senator. I was delighted because I thought her both able and a good person. Then she introduced me to her husband. I asked what he did. He said, "I'm a lobbyist." My heart sank.

## Tragic misdirection

We have run several items criticizing District of Columbia ambulance dispatchers for their apparent ignorance of the city's geography, as they send ambulances all the way across the city to pick up injured citizens despite the fact that other ambulances closer to the scene are available.

Recently, my friend and fellow journalist David Rosenbaum was the victim of the same idiocy. When he was mugged in northwest Washington, an ambulance was dispatched from six miles away at Providence Hospital in northeast Washington, even though two other ambulances were much closer to Rosenbaum. David, a truly good man, died.

## The long lines don't end when you die

The terrible truth about the District government is that it is loaded with incompetents at every level. No mayor wants to face this fact, so even though the bow-tied, Ivy-league Tony Williams seemed to be an improvement over the cocaine-addicted Marion Barry, he has made little difference in the performance of the city's bureaucrats.

Among the recent examples is the D.C. medical examiner's office, which has a backlog of 1,037 unfinished autopsies. Seven hundred and sixty five are at least a year old. "Maryland and Virginia, by comparison," reports the *Post*'s Cheryl W. Thompson, "have no cases more than a year old."

## Meet me in Honolulu

One reason District employees have difficulty getting their work done is that they aren't in the office. They are out of town on "official travel," often attending what the *Post*'s Dan Keating and David S. Fallis described as "week-long conferences in casinos and resorts." The district spends five and a half times as much per employee on travel each year as does Baltimore.

## Do not admit human

Elizabeth Davis has taught in seven District schools over the last 30 years. All seven, she recently wrote in a letter to the *Post*, would be "on a 'Condemned: Do Not Admit Humans' list if they were residential properties." As for her current school:

"I have to cover books, computers, and student work stations with plastic to catch the falling plaster and water from the leaking roof. In the school cafeteria, 55-gallon garbage cans are strategically placed to catch the water from gaping holes in the ceiling. In warm weather, we swelter without air conditioning; in cold weather, we shiver."

Where does the money go that is not spent on fixing the schools? Davis explains:

"Whenever I attend D.C. board of education or council meetings, I



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marvel at the state-of-the-art facilities.... When some of my students have accompanied me, I've noticed how awed they are.... They must wonder why their school is crumbling while those who run the city meet in comfortable, cushioned, air-conditioned or well-heated rooms."

Her description of the council and board meetings can be verified by tuning into the Washington TV channel devoted to district government proceedings. Unfortunately, it does not show the crumbling schools.

## Just file it under 'maintenance costs'

Speaking of travel abuses, *The Wall Street Journal* reports that a growing number of corporate executives are using the company jet to fly them on jaunts to their private golf clubs. Albert Lord of Sallie Mae flies from Washington to Naples, Fla. Edward Zander of Motorola wings from the company's headquarters in Illinois to Monterey, Calif. U.S. Steel's Thomas Usher and National City's David Debarko like variety, Usher flying to golf clubs in Augusta, Ga., and Naples, and Debarko to Martha's Vineyard and Palm Beach. Needless to say, the cost of these trips is concealed from stockholders with accounting devices worthy of Enron. Left out of the computation are such items as crew salaries and the price of the plane, which for corporate jets can range from $15 million to $40 million.

## We can end dependence on oil

It sometimes seems that we will never find a way of ending our dependence on oil from the Middle East, but there is a precedent for our solving a similar problem. I was reminded of it by a recent article in the *Charleston Gazette* by Clarence M. Nelson regarding the giant synthetic rubber plant in Institute, W.V.

**What will the GOP base make of the fact that Karl Rove's attorney, Donald Luskin, was the first man to wear an earring while arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court?**

When Malaya fell to the Japanese in 1942, our supply of rubber was cut off. Rubber for tires was needed for all the cars and trucks in America, as well as for the enormous military machine we would send abroad. This was definitely not an easy challenge to meet, but a solution had to be found, and found fast.

Scientists from 11 universities joined to do the necessary research. The giant rubber companies—Goodyear, Goodrich, Firestone, and the company that became Uniroyal—pooled their technology. The time pressure was intense. Existing stockpiles of natural rubber would last only a year. But by 1943, the synthetic plants were in operation and supplied the tires that were needed to move the nation and win the war.

## Baseball and sex

Anyone who has worked in a large organization for long has to master the art of appearing busy even if he's thinking about baseball or sex. Marshall Wittman, Washington's new king of quotes, has an answer to the problem: "The key is to always walk with a piece of paper in your hand and always walk fast, even if you're just going to the bathroom. Walk fast, carry a piece of paper, and look harried."

## The Medicare mess

The media has done a miserable job on the Medicare prescription-drug benefit. Last fall, one story after another told how confused the public was. But I could never find an article that made a serious attempt at dispelling the confusion and explaining the benefit. To be sure, it would have been a difficult story to do, but it could have been done, with enough examples of typical cases to clarify the choice seniors were faced with.

I was so concerned that I left messages for both Bill Keller and Len Downie, the editors of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, urging them to do the story. They chose not to. As the program began in January, all we got were stories saying that it was a mess. We were told that it would be a mess, that it was a mess, without ever getting a serious attempt to prevent the mess.

## See ya in Naples, John

The student loan bill just passed by Congress encourages students to take out private loans instead of borrowing directly from the government, according to Bloomburg News, even though a study by the Government Accountability Office shows that backing the private loans costs five times per dollar more than the direct government loan.

One explanation for this apparent insanity is offered by Anya Kamenetz in a *New York Times* op-ed. It seems that Sallie Mae—remember, its CEO flies the company jet to Naples, Fla., for golf—is the "largest contributor by far to members of the House Education Committee." The committee's chairman, Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), received $172,000 from private lenders and loan consolidators like Sallie Mae.

## Alito's choice

What I liked about Judge Samuel Alito was that he wanted to join the ROTC that liberals had expelled from the Princeton cam-



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pus. The disrespect the left showed for the military then still haunts us today. It was also self-defeating. The military needs more liberals and more liberals need to join the military.

What I can't understand about Alito—or forgive—is that memo he wrote that defended the shooting in the head of an eighth grader with a stolen purse and 10 dollars on his body. The boy was not armed and the officer who shot him did not think he was. All he was doing was running away. How could Alito call that killing reasonable? To me it was murder.

## The case against breakfast meetings

I often complain of not being at my best when I wake up in the morning. If my wife starts listing problems that must be dealt with that day, the wheels in my brain grind with agonizing slowness and often fail to mesh. Now comes the news that I'm not alone.

According to a recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that was reported by Lee Bowman of Scripps Howard, "people awakened after eight hours sleep have more impaired thinking and memory skills—equivalent to being drugged—than someone kept awake for 24 hours." This impairment can last for up to two hours, which helps explain why many of us feel the need to give our internal re-start button a quick jolt of caffeine.

## The other mine disaster

"[M]uch of the press has abandoned reporting on health and safety regulation until disaster strikes," writes Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post*. "How many reporters have dug into the Labor Department's Mine, Safety and Health Administration, which under the Bush administration was run by a former Utah mine manager until last year? About as many as did pieces before Hurricane Katrina on why a former Arabian horse official was running the dysfunctional bureaucracy of the Federal Emergency Management Agency."

**Nothing better illustrates the Bush administration's tender solicitude for the feelings of mine owners than the change of the inspectors' title to "Compliance Assistant Specialist."**

In the case of FEMA, we know it was only Jon Elliston of *The Independent*, a small, North Carolina publication, who took a good look at the agency and warned that it was heading downhill. In the case of MSHA, the media record is not much better. The main alarm sounder was also a reporter for a publication that does not enjoy national readership, the intrepid Ken Ward Jr. of the *Charleston Gazette*, who has made a career out of holding the coal barons' feet to the fire.

This is not a recent problem. For more than three decades, I've been pointing out that while the media gives major attention to mine disasters, it does almost no reporting on what's being done to improve mine safety between disasters. Few reporters are eager to go down into dark, dank mines where the air is foul and the ceiling usually so low you have to stoop or even crawl.

So it isn't until miners are dead that we find out such facts as:

—The amount of fines collected from mine companies for safety violations dropped by more than 75 percent between 2000 and 2004.

—In the same period, the number of mining companies referred to the Justice Department for prosecution dropped from 38 to 12.

—The average amount of the fines is now just $150.

Nothing better illustrates the Bush administration's tender solicitude for the feelings of mine owners than the change of the inspectors' title to "Compliance Assistant Specialist." The Bush people have even denied public access to the inspectors notes and agreed to hold violation hearings behind closed doors, sometimes even excluding union and victim representatives. MSHA did not shut down the Sago mine even though:

—It was cited for 16 serious violations in just the last year.

—There were 20 roof collapses last year, 14 since June.

—Yet its owner, Wilbur Ross, felt smug enough to tell "Prime Time Live": "We were confident based on assurances from our management that the mine was safe."

Of course, all of the facts about MSHA and the violation should have been reported before the disaster, when reporting could have prevented all those lost lives. One of the reasons I started *The Washington Monthly* was concern about this kind of failure of journalism—and it was the sole reason I started a foundation called Understanding Government, to encourage the press to report regularly on government agencies, how well they are doing their job, and how they can get better. This mission is not just some pious "good government" endeavor. It is also about saving lives, and not just in the mines or from Katrina—think what good reporting about what had gone wrong at the FBI and CIA might have done to prevent 9/11 or to keep us from invading Iraq for the wrong reasons.



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# 10 MILES SQUARE

## John Fund *Again?*

It's not your imagination—the Sunday shows really do lean right.

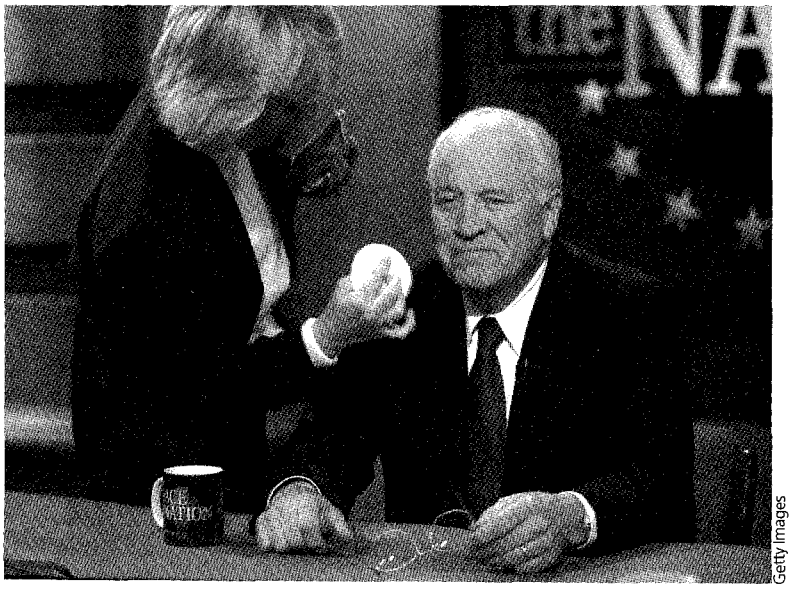
**By Paul Waldman**

If you're up early on Sunday mornings in Washington, you can observe a weekly ritual. Around 9am, a string of chauffeured town cars and SUVs pulls up outside the NBC studio on Nebraska Avenue in Northwest Washington where "Meet the Press" is recorded, and out tumble government officials and politicians, reporters, and pundits. They scan the weekend papers over coffee in the green room, catch up with the women who apply their make-up, and wait for their chance to spin or pontificate. One thing you might notice about these select individuals—other than the fact that there are very few women—is that lately they are mostly conservative.

Which leads to another Sunday morning ritual: American liberals yelling at their televisions.

No, liberals, it's not your imagination. "Meet the Press" and the other Sunday political talk shows really have leaned more to the right in recent years. At Media Matters for America, we looked at every one of the 7,000 guests who appeared on the three major Sunday shows from 1997 through 2005—Bill Clinton's second term, George W. Bush's first term, and the last year. We found that the left has of late found itself outnumbered, in some ways substantially, on the television shows that define the Washington conventional wisdom. Liberals are already a disturbingly rare species among what Calvin Trillin refers to as the "Sabbath Gasbags." And in some debates—the war in Iraq, for example—they are in danger of becoming extinct.

This is no small thing. The combined audience of the Sunday shows is around 10 million households. While that may not be quite as large as that of "American Idol," it includes the entire Washington establishment, which looks to the Sunday shows to clarify who the important players are, which stories matter most, and what arguments can be considered seriously. The Sunday shows confer status—both on people and on ideas—with greater effect



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than any other news presentation. They are the place where Washington's power elite goes to make its case, where the boundaries of debate are determined and the talking points presented and probed. When Vice President Dick Cheney wanted to make the case for war in Iraq, he took to these pulpits, famously linking the 9/11 attacks and Saddam Hussein's regime. When a senator or member of Congress gets invited to appear, he or she has officially been designated a national figure. And when you open up a national newspaper on Monday morning, chances are you'll see an article describing the most important or novel thing that was said the morning before on the Sunday shows.

## Fair play

Since the Sunday shows focus so heavily on the words and actions of the powerful, it's perhaps not surprising that the party controlling the executive branch is represented more than the opposition. That's certainly the explanation producers give for their often lopsided line-ups. "If you take everybody from the Bush administration and label them Republicans or partisans," says Carin Pratt, the executive producer of CBS's "Face the Nation," "we're a country at war, and when we can get someone from the administration [to be a guest on the show], like the secretary of state, then we get them. Republicans are in power. I bet you'd find the same thing during Clinton's administration." Betsey Fischer, the executive producer of NBC's "Meet the Press," responds much the same way. "The party holding the presidency also has a Cabinet full of major newsmaker guests that speak to U.S. policy matters," she says. "The same would be true for the eight years of the Clinton administration when the Cabinet was, by and large, filled with Democrats."

This sounds reasonable enough—except Pratt and Fischer are wrong about the Clinton years. In fact, during Clinton's second term, only 48 percent of the ideologically identifiable guests on the Sunday shows were Democrats or progressives while 52 percent were Republicans or conservatives. (Available transcripts from Clinton's first term are not complete enough to allow analysis.) And when Bush swept into town, the gap widened further. In Bush's first term, Republicans and conservatives held a solid advantage, outtalking the left by 58 to 42 percent. (Things were virtually the same in 2005, with the margin 57 to 43 percent in favor of the right). There were small differences between the shows, but all showed the same overall pattern: rough parity during the Clinton years, Republican domination during the Bush years.

Perhaps this shift is explained by the fact that we had a divided government when Clinton was president and have had one-party rule under Bush. But if that's true, how do we explain the years 2001 and 2002? For a 16-month period in which the Democrats held control of the Senate, the number of Democrats booked on the shows not only did not increase, but actually dropped further. Political power, it seems, does not always equal access to the airwaves.

You might think this balance would shift somewhat during an election year, when both parties have major candidates who make headlines and attract attention. Again, Fischer of "Meet the Press" told us directly that this should happen. "When one party has 10 contenders for the presidential nomination [as the Democrats did in 2004]," she wrote in an email, "one could expect those candidates to occupy a majority of interview time on the program." One could indeed expect that result, but one would be wrong. Despite all the appearances by Democratic presidential hopefuls—and they had a whole slew, compared to the uncontested Republican primaries—Republicans still outnumbered Democrats on "Meet the Press" in 2004, just as they did on "Face the Nation" and ABC's "This Week."

## Those liberal journalists

This ideological imbalance isn't only evident in the "official" sources that are interviewed: the elected officials, candidates, and administration officials who make up most of the shows' guests. It is even clearer in the roundtable discussions with featured journalists. (Although "Face the Nation" seldom uses a journalist roundtable to mull over the week's news, it is a staple on both "Meet the Press" and "This Week.") Though there has been some marginal improvement in the past year, it has been a frequent practice for a roundtable to consist of a right-wing columnist or two supposedly "balanced" by journalists from major newspapers. While these newspaper journalists may also be columnists, they don't operate with the same expectation of—or license for—partisanship that their conservative counterparts do. If David Broder or Ronald Brownstein express an openly partisan opinion, they know that



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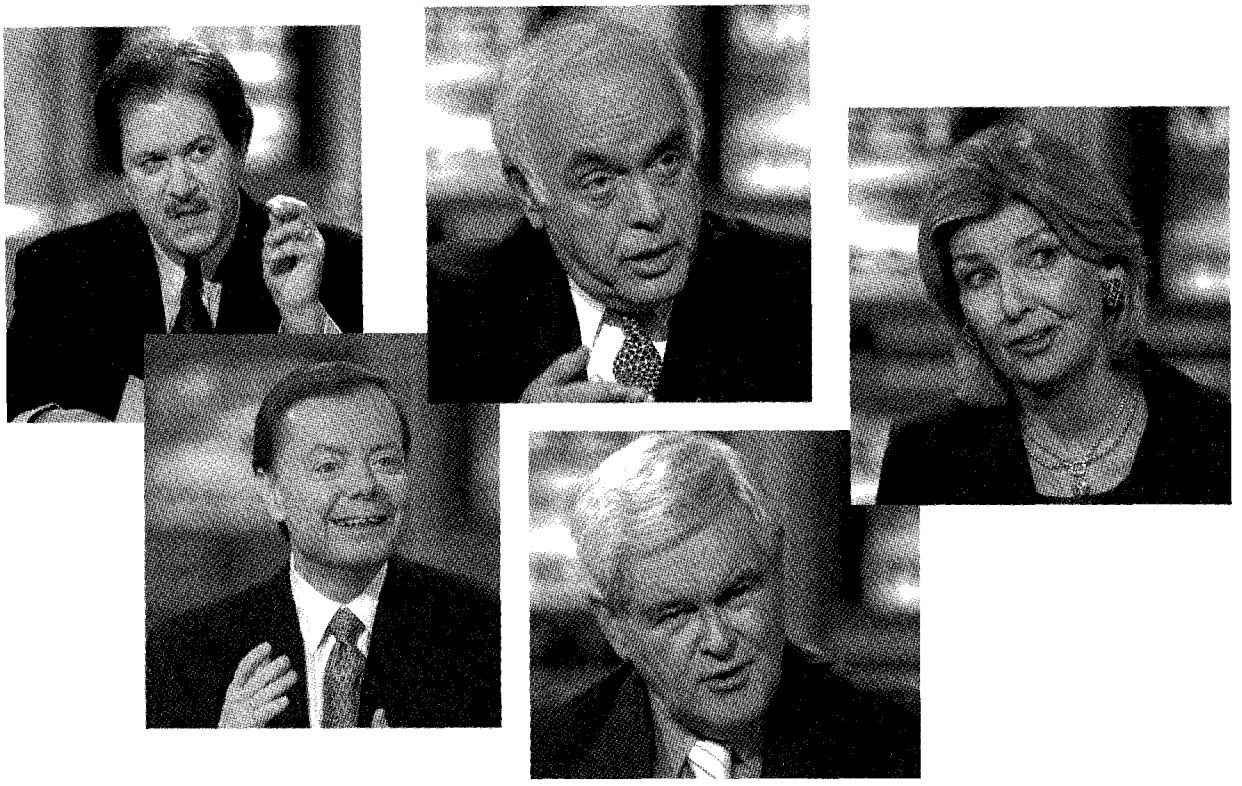

their editors are likely to call them to task for it. By the same token, if Fred Barnes doesn't use his time to spout talking points, he knows his editors will be disappointed.

When liberals do appear, the balance is often stacked against them. For nearly three years in the late 1990s, the regular roundtable on "This Week" featured George Will and William Kristol double-teaming George Stephanopoulos. On five occasions, Stephanopoulos was absent, and Will's establishment conservatism had to provide "balance" to Kristol's triumphalist conservatism. But even when the former Clinton aide was in the studio, he was in the process of trying to shed his political reputation and become a "Journalist," he who expresses no personal views, making the debate even more lopsided than it otherwise would have been.

The consequence of all this is that in every year since 1997, conservative journalists have dramatically outnumbered liberal journalists, in some years by two-to-one or more. Why would the producers of the shows believe that a William Safire (56 appearances since 1997) or Bob Novak (37 appearances) is somehow "balanced" by a Gwen Ifill (27) or Dan Balz (22)? It suggests that some may have internalized the conservative critique of the media, which assumes that daily journalists are "liberal" almost by definition, and thus can provide a counterpoint to highly partisan conservative pundits.

What gets left behind, of course, is the real liberal. Not only do openly liberal columnists like Paul Krugman appear far less frequently than their conservative colleagues, writers, and editors from magazines like the *Nation*, *The American Prospect*, and *The New Republic* are seldom seen (forget about the *Progressive*, *Mother Jones* or *In These Times*), while the *Weekly Standard* and the *National Review* are regularly represented. Last year saw eleven appearances by writers from the two conservative magazines, but only two from liberal magazines. (There was one bright spot in the data: A December 1998 episode of "Meet the Press" featured none other than Charles Peters, this magazine's founder. Unfortunately, that was the last time anyone from *The Washington Monthly* graced the Sunday shows.)

## Television war

The relative absence of one group or another—liberal journalists, say—is troubling if it means that an entire position in a debate is left unrepresented. (To say nothing of an entire gender—a 2001 study by the White House Project, a nonpartisan women's advocacy group, found that in an 18-month period, nine out of 10 guests on the Sunday shows were men.) Over the past few



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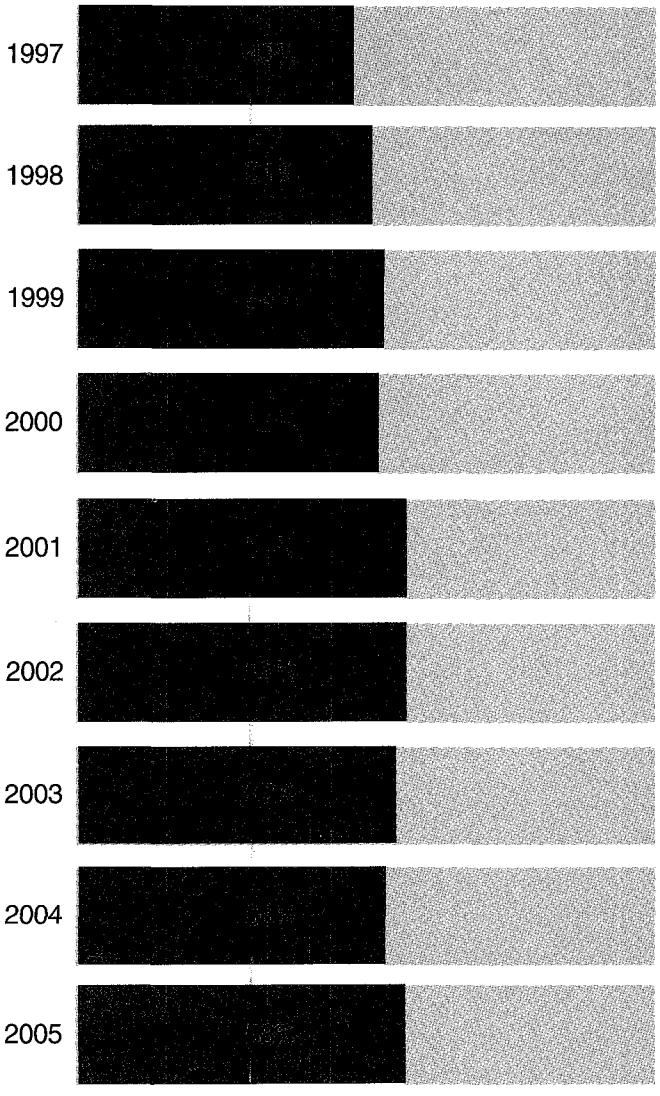
## Conservatives & Progressives on the Sunday political talk shows

Chart shows percentages of ideologically identifiable guests:




Source: Center for American Progress

years, a decidedly relevant view has been noticeably absent from the Sunday shows: consistent opposition to the Iraq war. On the most important debate of this period in our nation's history, one side—the side on which the majority of the American people now find themselves—has been represented by only a tiny number of guests. In the pre-war period, beginning in September 2002, only 18 percent of the members of Congress who appeared as guests ended up voting against the congressional resolution authorizing the war. During the war itself (the period of "major combat operations" ending with Bush's infamous "Mission Accomplished" carrier landing), the figure was a paltry 13 percent. And in the period since then, the anti-war position has been held by 17 percent of congressional guests. By comparison, 30 percent of representatives and senators voted against the resolution for war.

Consequently, debates on the war on Sunday mornings have been mostly between people who supported the war all along, and people who supported the war but have some criticisms of how it has been carried out. Over time, the shows have begun to take on a *Groundhog Day* quality, with each Sunday bringing yet another tribute by an administration official or friendly Republican to the terrific "progress" being made in Iraq, and yet another sort-of-refutation from Joe Biden reciting the umpteenth version of "As I told the president, we have to do what we're doing, just better."

Obviously, if nearly everyone involved agrees that the war was a good idea, the discussion will range over a fairly narrow field. Few will want to suggest they were dumb enough to be duped by the case the administration made—better to say the threat was real, and that all the problems have come in the execution. A politician who opposed the war from the beginning and didn't have to worry about her reputation would be more willing to point out the evident problems in the operation. If anything, those voices ought to be given more weight, rather than less. But other than exceptional cases like Jack Murtha (who voted for the war), those calling for withdrawal—a position favored in one form or another by around half of all Amer-



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icans, according to recent polling—will be nowhere to be found, making it relatively easy to dismiss their proposals out of hand.

## Quick fix

The good news is that, unlike complicated political issues such as lobbying reform and redistricting, this problem is easy to fix. There are, at most, a few dozen individuals at the three networks who make decisions about the Sunday lineups. It is possible, though unlikely, that they simply haven't known how lopsided their guest lineups are. If they have the will to address this imbalance, there's nothing—other than pressure from the right wing—stopping them. Adding more balance to the Sunday shows doesn't require statutory changes or legal remedies or even an election.

It might, however, require a little change in perspective. The producers would have to accept that voices on the left have as much legitimacy as voices on the right, that journalists from newspapers don't provide a balance to conservative opinion-mongers, and that there are, in fact, plenty of progressive writers and analysts who have interesting things to say and are worthy of being admitted to the exalted arena of the Sunday shows. Not exactly a radical idea.

**Paul Waldman** is a Senior Fellow with Media Matters for America. His next book, *Being Right is Not Enough: What Progressives Can Learn From Conservative Success,* will be released by John Wiley & Sons this spring.

*—Research provided by Amanda Fazzone and Robert Savillo.*

## Methodology

In designing the methodology for this study, Media Matters sought to employ rules for classifying guests that would be simple, easy to apply, and acceptable to readers from across the ideological spectrum. We did not attempt to ascertain whether what a particular guest said on a particular show adhered to his or her ideological profile or was critical or supportive of one party or administration. Instead, we simply coded guests by their affiliation and history. Current and former elected and administration officials, candidates, and party officials were classified as Democrat or Republican; all others were Conservative, Progressive, or a neutral category including centrists and those to whom ideology was not applicable. Rules were established for certain classes of guests that appeared frequently; for instance, active duty military personnel were coded as representing the administration in power at the time of the appearance, but retired military personnel, since they are nearly always brought on only to offer military analysis, were coded as neutral. Given that Media Matters is a progressive organization and we hypothesized (correctly, as it turned out) that conservatives have an advantage on the Sunday shows, we understood that criticism of our conclusions would be likely to come from the right. Therefore, in the few close calls we encountered, we erred on the side of classifying guests to the left. Further details on the methodology and results of the study can be found at www.mediamatters.org.

**The Washington Monthly's**

# Monthly Journalism Award

## Ellen Smith

### *Mine Safety and Health News*

Unless your business involves mining—doing it, regulating it, protesting it—chances are you've never heard of *Mine Safety and Health News*, an industry newsletter owned and edited by Ellen Smith. Long before the disaster at the Sago mine, Smith and her team of investigative reporters were busy shining a bright light on some of the industry's soot-covered safety and health practices and the lackluster government agency charged to oversee them. One Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) inspector, the newsletter reported in November, now faces a five year jail term for falsifying inspection reports for mines he never even visited. And while investigating government malfeasance is always difficult, Smith and her colleagues face an additional challenge: "In MSHA's continuing rollback of public information," they wrote, "the agency is hiding timely information about mine injuries in the name of 'personal privacy,' even though that same information is often publicly released in other sections of the MSHA website."

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to one or more newspaper, magazine, radio, or television stories (or series of stories) that demonstrate a commitment to the public interest. We are particularly interested in reporting that explains the successes and failures of government agencies at all levels and of other institutions such as the media, corporations, unions, and foundations that contribute to the existence or solution of public problems. We welcome your nominations. Or email us at editors@washingtonmonthly.com.



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# Not One Dime

## A radical plan to Abramoff-proof politics.

**By James Carville and Paul Begala**

Republicans are trying to run away from the growing Abramoff scandal like the devil runs from holy water. And who can blame them? While the GOP tries lamely to pretend that the lobbying scandal is bipartisan, the truth is that the pay-for-play politics that Abramoff exemplifies has become central to the GOP's governing model, in a way it has not been for either party in decades. That's why the officials so far snared are all Republican. The House GOP Leader, Tom DeLay, is indicted and disgraced. The White House's chief procurement officer, an Abramoff ally, has also been indicted. Republican Congressman Duke Cunningham has already pleaded guilty to corruption, and the feds are said to be hot on the heels of several of his colleagues.

This is shaping up to be the biggest political scandal in a decade, and the GOP knows it. And so Republicans have been jumping on the same "lobbying reform" bandwagon that many (though alas not all) Democrats have been driving for months. Each party has its laundry list of worthy procedural changes, from making retiring politicians wait an extra year before becoming lobbyists to ending the free lunches, dinners, and football tickets politicians accept from K Street.

Many of these ideas are fine, as far as they go. But we think they don't go anywhere near far enough. Indeed, they are likely to meet the same fate as the bipartisan McCain-Feingold bill. McCain-Feingold, which was reluctantly signed into law by President Bush in 2002, was an honest effort to limit the influence of big money in politics. But it has not succeeded. Politicians are spending more time than ever scrambling for money, and the influence of lobbyists and corporations has hardly declined.

There's a vast need for bolder reform, and the Abramoff scandals provide the opportunity of a lifetime. Voters aren't going to be fooled by procedural tinkering. What's needed is total root-to-branch reform. As any average person will tell you, the heart of the problem is that elected officials take money from interested parties. Whether it's technically legal or not, accepting money as a public servant is a form of bribery, and it serves to fundamentally corrupt democracy. We don't let cops, customs agents, or federal judges take money from the people they're serving. We should hold elected officials to the same standards. They should be out of the fundraising business altogether.

### Cut off the incumbents

The biggest problem with the status quo of campaign fundraising is that it puts good people in a bad system. Nearly every member of the House and Senate, whether sinner or saint, spends a spectacular amount of time raising money. The very process of raising money distorts the politician's perspective. You try spending six hours a day, six days a week in a cramped room calling people and sucking up to them for money. If the only people you ever talk to are people with the wherewithal to contribute thousands of dollars to your campaign, that is bound to affect the way you see the world. You don't hear much about the minimum wage from folks who can write a check for $2,000. Nor do you spend a lot of time calling people who don't have health insurance or who can't afford their prescription drugs.

We propose fundamentally and radically reforming the way that campaigns are financed. Our proposal combines the fondest dream of liberal reformers—public financing of campaigns—with the fondest dream of conservative and libertarian reformers—no restrictions at all on donations from American citizens. The goal is to put a little distance between power and money. Federal office holders have power but need money. Special interests have money but need power. When the two come together, trading money for power, bad things happen.

Here's how our plan would work:

First, we raise congressional pay big time. Pay 'em what we pay the president: $400,000. That's a huge increase from the $162,000 congressmen and senators

This article is adapted from *Take It Back: Our Party, Our Country, Our Future* by James Carville and Paul Begala. Copyright © 2006 by James Carville and Paul Begala. Printed by permission of Simon & Schuster, Inc.



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currently make. Paul, especially, has been a critic of congressional pay increases. But he is willing to more than double politicians' pay in order to get some of the corrupt campaign money out of the system. You see, the pay raise comes with a catch. In return, we get a simple piece of legislation that says members of Congress cannot take anything of value from anyone other than a family member. No lunches, no taxi rides. No charter flights. No golf games. No ski trips. No nothing.

And when it is campaign time, incumbents would be under a complete ban on raising money. You read that right. No president or member of Congress could accept a single red cent from individuals, corporations, or special interests. Period.

Challengers, on the other hand, would be allowed to raise money in any amount from any individual American citizen or political action committee. No limits, just as the free-market conservatives have always wanted. But here is the catch: Within 24 hours of receiving a contribution, the challenger would have to report it electronically to the Federal Election Commission, which would post it for the public to see. That way, if you want to accept a million dollars from, say, Paris Hilton, go for it. But be prepared for voters and reporters to ask what you promised her in exchange.

The day after you disclose Paris's million bucks, the U.S. Treasury would credit the incumbent's campaign account with a comparable sum—say 80 percent of the contribution to the challenger to take into account the cost of all the canapés and Chardonnay the challenger had to buy to raise his funds as well as the incumbent's advantage. So if Paris gave the challenger a mill, the Treasury would wire $800,000 to the incumbent. It couldn't be much simpler. You might even call it the flat tax of campaign laws.

The penalties for violation would be swift. If an incumbent accepts so much as a postage stamp, he loses his seat. If a challenger doesn't report contributions, he loses his shot. If you cheat, you are out on your ass.

What if the incumbent wants to spend her own money? After all, the Supreme Court has made it clear that the Constitution does not allow restrictions on how much money a candidate—challenger or incumbent—can spend. No problem. Uncle Sam would write the challenger a check for an equivalent amount. Unlike today, no one would have the upper hand simply because they were loaded.

What if a sitting congressman wants to run for senator, or a senator wants to run for president? Would he be allowed to raise funds? Sure. He'd just have to do what Bob Dole eventually did—resign his Senate seat and hit the campaign trail like a regular citizen. If you want to run for higher office, you have to get off your current pedestal first.

The idea is to fundamentally change the role and responsibilities of incumbency. Under our plan, incumbents have to live by Thomas Jefferson's maxim: "When a man assumes a public trust, he should consider himself as public property." (We know, we know, the language is archaically sexist, but we are not going to edit Mr. Jefferson.) Once you assume an elected office, you achieve a new status. You are no longer a campaigner. You are a public servant. As such you should not be in the fundraising business. You should be in the exclusive business of making policy.

Today more than 90 percent of all senators and representatives are re-elected. Under current law, incumbents almost always have a huge money advantage. Our wager is that a majority of incumbents would be willing to give up that advantage in exchange for higher pay and no time spent fundraising. Think about it. Not only would they be bringing in a much larger salary, they'd also never have to kiss up to another rich donor. You should never underestimate how much these folks hate spending half their time—or more—sniveling for money. Nor should you underestimate how damaging and distorting it is to require federal office holders to spend that time raising money. No wonder they vote on so much legislation without ever reading it.

And what about the public? We haven't seen the final data for 2004, but in all the federal races in 2000—congressional, senatorial, and presidential—candidates spent a total of $1.6 billion. Half of that, which is what taxpayers would have had to shell out under our plan, would be a lot of money: $800 million. But that is nothing compared to what the current system costs us. Those special interests who pour money into politicians' campaigns get something in return. Actually, they get a lot in return. Special tax breaks, special loopholes, special funding of pork-barrel projects, maybe even a no-bid contract or two. The energy bill passed in 2005 handed $2 billion in subsidies to the ethanol industry—you know, the fine folks at Archer Daniels Midland. It gave the makers of the controversial fuel additive MTBE another $2 billion. And another $8.1 billion in tax breaks for oil, coal, and electric utilities. In all, that one bill cost you $80.8 billion.

All of a sudden $800 million—one percent of the cost of one bill—doesn't seem like very much money, does it?

We know our plan is not perfect. Some will argue over whether the plan favors incumbents or challengers. Some will argue whether it favors Democrats or Republicans. Some will argue whether salary increases for politicians are justified.

We have our doubts as well, but if more money from the taxpayers makes it easier for politicians to agree to no money from special interests, it's a good deal.

At its core, this plan does something no one will argue with: It forever divorces the corrosive—and sometimes corrupting—effect of campaign cash from members of Congress and presidents. When American citizens look at their Congress and White House, they will say what Alexander Hamilton said to a visitor to the newly-constructed U.S. Capitol: "Here, Sir, the people govern." ◆



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# Nuclear Waste

## Our far-flung nuclear weapons factories haven't built a bomb since 1992. One lone Republican wants to shut them down.

**By Zachary Roth**

In 1942, the United States government began creating a secret city. On 59,000 acres in the hills of eastern Tennessee, it built a complex—one of three nationwide—dedicated to the production of materials for an atomic weapon. From the start, the very existence of the new city, named Oak Ridge after a nearby mountain ridge, was shrouded in mystery. Though at its peak of production during World War II, Oak Ridge used one-seventh of all the electricity produced in the United States and had a population of 75,000—making it the fifth largest city in Tennessee—it didn't appear on maps until 1949. Residents were required to wear identification badges whenever they went out of the house, and the Oak Ridge high school football team played only road games. But there was good reason for the clandestine measures: By late 1943, Oak Ridge's Y-12 plant was using electromagnetism to create the highly enriched uranium that would be used in the "Little Boy" atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, helping to bring the war to an end.

For Oak Ridge, those were the glory days, and the city works hard to keep their memory alive. A museum in town educates a few stray tourists on Oak Ridge's starring role in the development of the bomb. Visitors to the complex are given a CD-ROM — "Discover World War Two's Secret City"—whose cover shows Oak Ridgers excitedly displaying newspapers that hail the end of the war. Last June, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the event, Oak Ridge held a "Secret City Festival," which featured, among other attractions, the opening to the public of Y-12's Beta-3 building, which had been used during the war to separate isotopes, and which still contains crates bearing the date of the plant's first year in operation. "Looks just like it did in 1943," says Bill Wilburn, the public relations representative for BWXT, a private contractor that runs Y-12, as we look down on Beta-3 from a nearby ridge. Oak Ridge's starring role in history continued into the Cold War, when the arms race with the Soviet Union required rapid weapons production. Indeed, driving around the vast facility with the flacks felt vaguely like being in one of those military movies from the 1950s. "It's like stepping back into history," notes Steve Wyatt, Y-12's public affairs manager.

Unfortunately, history is about the only thing going for Y-12 these days. The United States hasn't built a new nuclear weapon since the early '90s, and that's left the weapons plant's 6,000 employees with little to do. Today, they are literally moving material from one spot to another, spending around $300 million to transfer Y-12's store of radioactive metal from six separate on-site locations to one more modern and secure facility, currently under construction. Y-12 lists its main role as ensuring that the components used in our existing stockpile of weapons remain safe and reliable—an important task, to be sure, but not one capable of providing a long-term mission for Y-12.

Even the plant's physical appearance suggests its better days are behind it. An unmistakable air of ennui and decay hangs about the place. A few solitary workers shuffle from one building to another. Many of the original structures — their blocky, red-brick style and low ceilings characteristic of 1940s government architecture—remain in use, despite the appearance of decay. "It's a lot of old facilities, no question," says Wyatt.

Y-12's fusty aura is indicative of a broader problem. Our nuclear weapons complex was designed for the needs of a different age, and has struggled to reinvent itself for the 21st century. Almost 20 years after we built our last new nuclear weapon, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a semi-autonomous agency within the Department of Energy with a budget of $9 billion per year, continues to operate eight separate facilities, employing over 36,000 people, and offering an unnecessarily large number of targets to terrorists. Indeed, in 2005, the federal government spent one and a half times as much on our weapons complex, adjusted for inflation, as our average annual spending during the Cold War, for a greatly reduced set of activities. In short, our nuclear weapons complex is unsafe, costly, inefficient, and largely without purpose.

Last summer, a congressionally-mandated report produced by a blue-ribbon task force of experts found that reducing the number of sites we operate would save money, improve security, and make the complex better able to produce the next generation of nuclear weapons the

**Zachary Roth** is an editor of *The Washington Monthly.*



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United States may someday need. It was the kind of report you might think elected officials would have seized on. After all, at the time, the Bush White House and GOP congressional leaders were in tense negotiations over how to reduce the president's massive budget deficit. Desperate congressional leaders were targeting student loans, Medicaid—anything they could think of to save precious dollars and restore their party's reputation as the standard-bearer of small government. The news, then, that by shuttering dilapidated and largely redundant government facilities, they could save billions, while making Americans safer against a terrorist attack, ought to have been heralded. Indeed, at a similar moment of fiscal panic during the 1990s, Congress and the Clinton White House agreed to help the Defense Department adapt to the post-Cold War world by creating an independent commission to recommend the closing of obsolete military bases. But this time, Congress and the administration reacted to the DOE weapons complex report with studied indifference, and in some cases, outright hostility.

## Sitting ducks

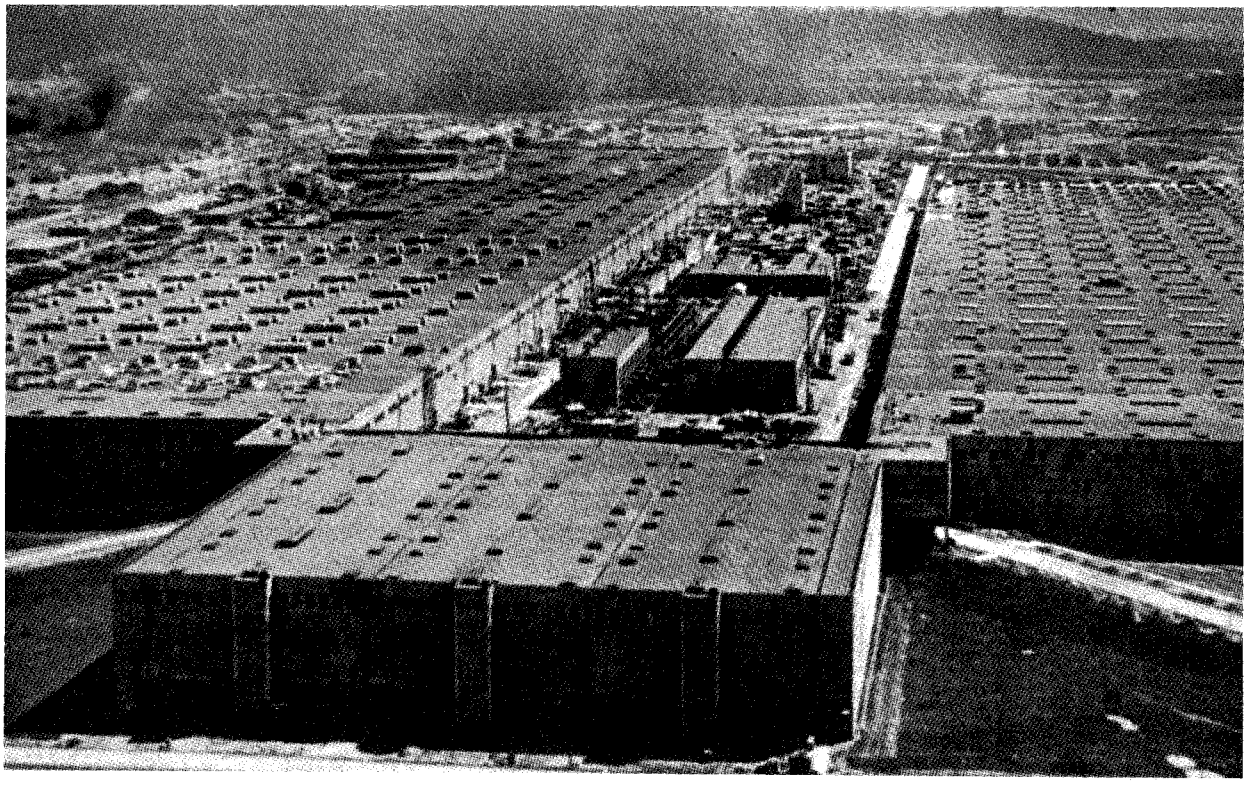
"I can't emphasize enough the degree to which these facilities are archaic," says David Overskei, who headed the task force that looked at restructuring the complex. At Y-12, according to a manager at another facility, workers at one point had to wear hard hats indoors because of the risk of pieces of the ceiling becoming dislodged. His own site, too, he adds, is "falling apart.... There's buildings that wouldn't pass any building code known to man."

It's not surprising that many of the facilities are degrading. Like their counterparts in the former Soviet Union, America's nuclear weapons sites were largely designed and built half a century ago for a war that has long ended. Elected officials don't have the incentive to spend the vast sums it would take to properly maintain these facilities. Yet neither do they have the political courage to pull the fiscal plug entirely on individual sites, and put tens of thousands of employees out of work.

The fact that the complex consists of eight separate sites in seven states, all of them represented by lawmakers dedicated to protect those jobs, makes the job of shutting them down even tougher. There are two major design labs, the Los Alamos National Laboratory in Los Alamos, N. M.; and the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in Livermore, Calif. There are also six other sites—located, in addition to Oak Ridge, in Albuquerque, N. M.; southern Nevada; Amarillo, Texas; Kansas City, Mo.; and near Aiken, S. C.—which handle various parts of the design, production, testing, maintenance, and safeguarding of our weapons stockpile and its components.

In the early years, there were good reasons to disperse the complex around the country and to create separate facilities for different functions. Doing so helped defend against espionage and fostered a spirit of healthy competition. The approach worked brilliantly during the race for an atomic weapon to defeat Hitler and Hirohito, as well as for much of the Cold War that followed when the U.S. arms buildup successfully deterred the Russians and helped keep the peace (see "Labs Behaving Badly" p. 19).

But once the Soviet Union fell, the far-flung complex



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Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which helped produce the atom bomb, circa 1950



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lost its primary raison d'etre—though a number of vital tasks remain. Maintaining the stockpile requires small-scale production of new weapons parts, as the existing parts age and decay. And new threats may well require us to build a whole new generation of weapons—with modern capabilities—in the not-too-distant future. We also need to protect our existing stockpile of almost 10,000 weapons — as well as the highly radioactive "special nuclear material" used in their creation — from falling into the wrong hands. And our weapons labs house the advanced nuclear science research that is crucial to ensuring that the United States retains its competitive edge in the field, and to the long-term success of the weapons program.

But with no ongoing production of new weapons, and, after September 11, 2001, with nuclear terrorism a newly-urgent threat, there is now little reason to have numerous separate sites scattered across the country. For one thing, the dispersal of sites significantly compromises nuclear security. There is no realistic chance of terrorists stealing a prefabricated nuclear weapon from any domestic site, but another alarming possibility has security experts worried. Six of the eight NNSA-run sites (the exceptions are the Kansas City site, which is little more than a warehouse that makes electronic components, and Savannah River in South Carolina) contain enough special nuclear material—most dangerously, weapons-grade uranium—to allow for the creation of an Improvised Nuclear Device (IND), a crude nuclear explosive that could potentially be detonated inside a weapons facility within minutes. By simply dropping a 100-pound mass of highly enriched uranium onto another similar mass from a height of about six feet, terrorists could create a nuclear reaction that would produce a blast of about 5-10 kilotons—the blast from the Hiroshima atomic bomb was 15 kilotons. Such an explosion would kill anyone within 2 kilometers—which at some facilities could mean tens of thousands of people—according to Frank Von Hippel, a physicist and nuclear expert at Princeton University.

Currently, a scenario in which terrorists could successfully storm a facility, gain access to the nuclear materials, and have enough time to set off an IND appears highly unlikely, but not impossible. And because the consequences would be so catastrophically high, it's a scenario that security experts take seriously. Matthew Bunn, who directs the Project on Managing the Atom at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, calls it "a very genuine concern."

The problem is made scarier still by the fact that many of our current facilities are simply in poor geographic locations for storing nuclear materials in a post-9/11 world. At Livermore, for instance, the exurban fringe of the Bay Area has spread so far east since the 1950s that there are now homes directly across the street from the lab's fence line, and only 800 yards from the facility's Superblock, which houses its store of plutonium. That prevents some guards from carrying the kind of powerful automatic weapons wielded by their counterparts at other sites, and also makes the potential death toll in the event of a successful attack even higher.

The Y-12 plant, meanwhile, sits in a valley between two high ridges. Security experts agree that the location makes the complex vulnerable to an attack that uses snipers on the higher ground to take out security guards, allowing others at ground level to gain access to the nuclear material contained in the facility.

Then there's the Pantex site in Amarillo, Texas. It's located directly beside the local airport, greatly increasing the chances of a plane—whether through terrorism or an accident—crashing into facilities that contain nuclear materials. (This is perhaps not as unlikely as it sounds. A woman who lived near Pantex for many years told me that guards once admitted they'd received a report of a plane crashing inside the facility but couldn't locate it, and asked for her help.)

As the report by Overskei's task force dryly put it, "Currently, the [Livermore], [Los Alamos], Y-12, and Pantex sites are sufficiently close to residential and commercial structures such that any partially successful terrorist attack on these sites may cause collateral damage to the surrounding civilian population and associated public and private assets."

Even leaving geographical and land-use issues aside, the level of security at our nuclear facilities is inadequate. In 2003, a one-ton truck crashed through the security fence at Livermore, and traveled several hundred yards inside the facility before being stopped by security guards. A report released soon after 9/11 by the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group in consultation with federal government security experts, concluded: "The Department of Energy is failing to adequately protect the American public from the possibility of a terrorist attack on one of its nuclear weapons facilities. Guards at the facilities are poorly equipped, spread thin, and lack training needed to defend against a real terrorist attack." The report also noted that guards failed more than 50 percent of the time to protect against attacks by mock-terrorists armed with readily available weapons and explosives. Little progress has been made in the last four-plus years: Another report, produced for NNSA by a team led by retired admiral Richard Mies and released in May of last year confirmed that even almost four years after 9/11, "The NNSA enterprise lacks a comprehensive strategic security plan."

There is general agreement that consolidating all special nuclear material into one well-guarded site would make us significantly safer. Even Spencer Abraham, then the secretary of energy, conceded the risk inherent in having special nuclear material spread across the country, declaring in a May 2004 speech that, because of security concerns, "we need to…reduce the number of sites with special nuclear material to the absolute minimum, consistent with carrying out our missions."

Doing so would also save money. For good reason, any site that contains weapons-quantities of nuclear materials —which could be as little as 5 pounds—must receive



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high-level protection. That means storing nuclear materials at six sites could cost, in effect, six times as much as storing them all at one. And since 9/11 —when it became clear that terrorists might be willing to kill themselves in the course of an attack—facilities have had to devise a plan to handle each and every new scenario that security experts imagine terrorists might attempt. As a result, NNSA's security costs have skyrocketed from $885 million in the year before 9/11, to over $1.4 billion in 2005.

## Machine politics

But aside from the issues of cost and security, the labs suffer from a more existential problem—a lack of purpose. Research, storage, maintenance, and security are important tasks, but NNSA has yet to give the labs a long-term, defining mission since we tested our last new weapons in 1992. That's left many weapons scientists, particularly at Los Alamos and Livermore, in a state of anxiety over the future of their jobs. They've reacted by turning themselves into experts on the federal government's grant-making process, and applying for funding for new projects and technologies —some only tangentially related to weapons design. For its part, the Department of Energy—as well as other agencies that fund some projects, like the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security—is inclined to grant these requests, recognizing the need to keep the scientists at their jobs and to keep federal dollars flowing to the labs, should their weapons-design skills be needed in the future.

Many of these new projects have come about over the last decade. When the Clinton administration agreed to stop testing nuclear weapons in 1993, it entered into a bargain with the labs, which feared that the end of nuclear production and testing could make them redundant. Without support from the labs, the administration knew that the test ban would never get through Congress. So the lab directors agreed to publicly support the ban, in return for receiving a slew of new technology that they said was needed to assure the ongoing safety of the stockpile in the absence of testing. Livermore, for instance, received the National Ignition Facility (NIF), a facility that fires laser beams at radioactive hydrogen fuel pellets, in order to study the effects of a nuclear fusion explosion. Los Alamos, for its part, got the Dual Access Radiographic

### Labs Behaving Badly

In the long and storied history of bureaucratic infighting, few contests have been more vitriolic than the one between our two major nuclear weapons design labs, Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore.

The antagonism has its roots in the relationship between the two fathers of the atomic program, Edward Teller and Robert Oppenheimer. In the late 1940s, Teller began advocating the immediate development of a hydrogen bomb, in response to the news that Russia had built an atomic weapon. Oppenheimer remained more cautious, and Teller soon became convinced that Los Alamos, whose director, Norris Bradbury, was an Oppenheimer ally, was insufficiently dedicated to the H-bomb project. With the help of Ernest Lawrence, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist and California scientific entrepreneur, Teller persuaded Congress to create a second design lab in Livermore, Calif., which would go full-speed ahead on the H-bomb project. From the start, scientists at Los Alamos felt undermined by and resentful of Teller and his new facility, which they saw as radical and potentially dangerous. Livermore scientists, for their part, saw their counterparts at Los Alamos as stodgy and risk-averse.

When the H-bomb was eventually produced, Livermore was given most of the credit. This infuriated scientists at Los Alamos, who had in fact run the thermonuclear tests that had helped pave the way for the bomb.

The ultimate truth, say historians, is that the rancor was probably worth it: Thanks to competition between the two labs, America more quickly produced the H-bomb, and therefore had a more effective deterrent against the Soviet Union sooner.

The bureaucratic competition is not always productive, however. At the end of the Cold War, Livermore scientists reviewed the Los Alamos design for the W88 warhead. They concluded, wrongly as it turned out, that the design was unsafe, and advised against building it, a judgment that was received at Los Alamos as a slap in the face. But having separate design labs, and a relationship of competition — even antagonism — between them, does make it easier for outsiders to gain access to information about their shortcomings. "If I want to hear what's wrong with the NIF at Livermore, my best option is to go to people at Los Alamos," says Hugh Gusterson, an MIT anthropologist who studies the culture of the weapons labs. "And if I want to hear what's wrong with the DAHRT at Los Alamos, I'll go to people at Livermore."

If elected officials ever get around to consolidating our weapons complex, they'll have to decide whether to also consolidate the design labs. (The production facilities largely work on separate aspects of the process, so there's no real competition taking place.) The Overskei report neither recommended nor discouraged consolidating the two labs into one. But some members of the task force privately support such a step — which would almost certainly mean shuttering Livermore, the smaller of the two. Doing so would not only provide the cost and security improvements associated with consolidation of special nuclear material. It would also, in all likelihood, make it easier to reduce the number of weapons scientists employed by the complex — and therefore the amount of federal money for "make-work" designed solely to keep those scientists busy. The question will be whether these advantages will outweigh the benefits of competition. —*Zachary Roth*



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Hydrodynamic Test (DARHT), which uses giant x-ray machines to create images of mock nuclear weapons.

But as it's turned out, the technology required for virtual testing costs more, not less, than actual testing. The labs almost certainly undersold the cost of many of the new machines. The NIF, for instance, was estimated at $677 million in 1993. In 1997, DOE requested from Congress $1.2 billion for construction, promising there would be no further increases. Four years later, the General Accounting Office (GAO) estimated the NIF's construction price tag to be $4.2 billion. And an independent analysis in the same year put the total cost of constructing and operating the NIF for 30 years—as NNSA intends —at $32.4 billion. "DOE lied to me," said an outraged Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev.) on the floor of the Senate in September 2000. "They sold me a bill of goods and I am not happy about it." Steven Schwartz, a nuclear expert who formerly edited the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists and has been a Brookings Institution scholar, argues, only semi-facetiously, that if we really want to save money, we should resume full-scale testing and production of weapons.

These costs might be acceptable if we knew what we were getting for our money. But because facilities like the NIF are designed more to increase our overall understanding of nuclear-weapons science than to perform specific tests, it's difficult for non-scientists to assess their utility. That makes it hard for outside overseers like Congress to oppose requests for new technology. When Ph.D. physicists say they need another machine to assure the safety of our weapons stockpile, most lawmakers are inclined to trust them. Indeed, it's now all but impossible for Congress to get an independent viewpoint on questions that require technical and scientific expertise: Until 1995, members could have consulted the federal Office of Technology Assessment. But in that year, then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich led an effort that abolished the agency.

Still, at least machines like the NIF and the DAHRT can be said to advance the long-term mission of our nuclear program. Some lab scientists have received grants to fund projects with no clear relation to weapons production, whatsoever. Grant Heffelfinger, a weapons scientist at Sandia, says he's working on sequencing proteins for microbes. Other scientists have studied the human genome, and global warming.

It's not that the work isn't worthwhile—few scientific issues are more urgent than global warming, after all. But it doesn't make sense for this work to be done by our nuclear facilities, rather than by the many advanced scientific agencies—like the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association, and the Scripps Institute—run or funded by the federal government. "I would never have picked Los Alamos or Sandia or Livermore to get involved with the genome," says Overskei. "It was make-work from the DOE...not based on inherent ability or expertise." Peter Stockton, a nuclear expert who was a top aide to energy secretary Bill Richardson during the '90's and now works for the Project on Government Oversight, agrees that the work is designed mainly for "keeping these guys busy." Our weapons complex, then, is getting further and further from its core mission. Adds Overskei: "The question becomes, at what point do you lose your focus?"

## Hobson's choice

One of the few people in Washington who wants to fix the problems of our nuclear weapons complex is David Hobson, a little-known Republican congressman from Ohio who chairs the House Energy and Water subcommittee that oversees NNSA and the complex. Hobson, a slight, bespectacled, and resolutely unglamorous man, has the aw-shucks demeanor of the Midwestern small business-owner he once was. He says "Warshington" for Washington and makes little jokes about the French, and about the officiousness of the bureaucrats who brief him. "I wasted a whole day at Stratcomm," he said —referring to the Pentagon's Strategic Command office—during a speech at the Center for American Progress (CAP), a liberal Washington think tank, last December. "Too many flip-charts. I almost left."

But Hobson has used his regular-guy persona—and his reputation as a fiscal conservative—to push for a safer, more modern, more efficient, less expensive complex. He has publicly accused the labs of running "jobs-preservation programs" for scientists. In the process, he has turned himself into public enemy number one at the labs. In his speech at CAP, Hobson recounted how, when he visited one facility recently, he caught sight of a list headed "Challenges." One item was the single word "Hobson."

After assuming the chairmanship of the subcommittee in 2003, Hobson and his staff became concerned that Y-12's plan to build a new, above-ground storage facility for its special nuclear materials was inadequate for the heightened-threat environment of the post 9/11 world. Instead of spending hundreds of millions to move the plant's SNM from six separate on-site locations to one, they thought, why not take a wide-angle look at our entire weapons complex, and consider consolidating all the SNM currently spread across the complex into one new, below-ground location? To that end, Hobson browbeat Abraham, then the secretary of energy, into agreeing to produce a report that would examine complex-wide consolidation.

The Overskei report—also known as the Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (or SEAB) report—was produced by a task force of distinguished nuclear, scientific, engineering, and management experts, reporting directly to the secretary of energy. When it came out last July, 16 months after Abraham's appearance before the subcommittee, the report called the current weapons complex "neither robust, nor agile, nor responsive, with little evidence of a master plan." It recommended consolidat-



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ing all special nuclear material into one location, as a way to improve security and cut costs. That essentially meant consolidating the complex's entire production capability—currently spread across six sites—into one. Though the report didn't explicitly say so, the clear implication of its recommendations was that some of the production sites —most likely Y-12 at Oak Ridge, Kansas City, and ultimately Pantex, should be shuttered entirely.

The report estimated that consolidation would likely save around $25 billion between now and 2030. Each year that consolidation is postponed would reduce savings by $2 billion. Consolidation would also improve the responsiveness, speed, and quality of the entire production process, the panel found. That's partly because being dispersed around the country makes it difficult to effectively integrate the various facets of the production process. It's also because the existing production sites, built in the '40s and '50s, are too old to quickly and efficiently produce weapons for the 21st century. A new production facility with state-of-the-art technology would reduce delays and re-work; cut environmental pollution, provide a safer work environment; and leave the complex less dependent on the highly-trained, aging workforce it currently employs. Says Don Trost, a member of Overskei's task force and a vice president of Techsource, a science and engineering consulting firm: "You put all these benefits together, and if this were your company, and it were your dollars being invested —which frankly it is, my friend—you'd say: 'no-brainer.'"

## BRAC to the future

Hobson said immediately that he agreed with the Overskei report "100 percent." But he was an army of one. The press virtually ignored it. Congress, NNSA, DOE, and the White House spent the next six months doing virtually nothing to put its recommendations into practice. And one powerful lawmaker tried to have the report taken out back and shot.

Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) chairs the Senate energy committee, which oversees the nuclear complex. It's a convenient job for the senior senator from New Mexico because that state has more federal government employees, per capita, than any other in the union; and most of those employees work at New Mexico's two weapons labs, Los Alamos and Sandia.

### America's bomb-making process, brought to you by Rube Goldberg

If the United States government were to resume building nuclear weapons today, the process would be a cross-country odyssey. The individual bomb parts would have to travel thousands of miles across the nation, with each journey being an invitation for a radioactive accident or a terrorist attack.

The process would probably begin in a boardroom at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Some of the lab's more than 10,000 physicists would first create a basic plan for the new bomb. They would decide on the weapon's size, the materials to be used in its construction, and the exact process for how to catalyze its nuclear reaction. Then, scientists at Los Alamos and our second major design lab, in Livermore, Calif., would together make an exact blueprint of the bomb design. Computer scientists at both labs would run the design specifications through supercomputer modeling software to help polish them for maximum efficacy.

Then, the stage would shift to the Sandia National Laboratories outside of Albuquerque, N.M. Having received an electronic copy of the bomb's blueprint from Los Alamos, Sandia engineers would design everything else for the weapon, from its aluminum casing to its parachute to the high explosive charge needed to set off the nuclear reaction.

Next stop, via a high-security military aircraft, would be the Y-12 site in Tennessee, where engineers would begin building the uranium shell, or tamper, for the bomb. Then it's off, by heavily armed rail or truck convoy, to the Savannah River site in South Carolina. There, technicians trained in handling nuclear materials would add the tritium or deuterium composites that turn a plain old fission bomb into a massive thermonuclear fusion bomb.

The shell and its radioactive materials would then retrace their route westward by rail or truck, headed for the Pantex weapons plant outside of Amarillo, Texas. That plant would have already received the advanced electronics parts from the Kansas City factory that makes all the circuitry for nuclear weapons. At Pantex, technicians would take plutonium and other weapons parts and assemble the live bomb.

But the journey wouldn't end there. The finished bomb would then be shipped from Texas to the Nevada Nuclear Testing Site, where it would be buried deep in the earth, covered with a plug of thousands of tons of cement, and ignited —in contravention of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Assuming the explosion went as expected, engineers at the Nevada site would give the go-ahead for full-scale production of the bombs at Pantex. As each weapon was finished and certified in Texas, it would then head by rail, plane, ship or truck to its (perhaps temporary) resting place — military bases around the world.

Producing a weapon using eight different sites would require us to regularly ship radioactive materials across the country, within a few miles of large population centers. That greatly increases the risk, and the potential consequences, of an accident or a successful terrorist attack. Though there's reason to believe that nuclear materials are inadequately protected within our nuclear facilities, they're likely to be even more exposed when traveling on open public roads.

*—Sam Jaffe*



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A wily veteran of the appropriations process, Domenici has, during the 11 years of his committee chairmanship, structured that appropriations process so as to maximize funding for the complex —and particularly for his state's facilities. He fought hard, for instance, to bring to Sandia the Microsystems and Engineering Sciences Applications (MESA) program, which manufactures computer-chip scale devices. "There's a number of programs that are doing quite well in the state of New Mexico," says Overskei. "Non-nuclear projects. But they still went into his facilities."

Domenici opposed the Overskei report from the start. "While there is always room for improvement, I believe our labs are doing good work, and I do not think we should rush into any quick fixes," he said in a statement after the report was released. He then inserted language in his committee report barring the use of funds to implement any of the report's recommendations. Though that language was ultimately struck in conference, it conveyed the firmness of Domenici's opposition to reform and set the tone for the conference negotiations. When all was said and done, Congress' budget for the fiscal year 2006 contained just $5 million to study consolidation.

Domenici is not acting entirely alone in Congress—many members of the New Mexico delegation have made continued funding for the labs a life-or-death issue. When the House Armed Services committee also suggested studying consolidation in 2002, it was forced to drop the idea amid unbending opposition from one of its members, Rep. Heather Wilson (R-N.M.).

To some observers, there's more than a little irony in the sight of conservative politicians going to the mat to protect government jobs. Says one high-ranking nuclear facility manager: "They're all red states who don't like government. But you try touching one of their complexes, saying 'this thing is really irrelevant and we should close it down,' and these guys sound like bleeding heart liberals: 'Don't you dare touch one of our jobs.'"

Such resistance can be overcome by a president committed to reform—especially if that president is of the same party as those in control of Congress. But President Bush's level of interest in grappling with the problems of our weapons complex is reflected by the fact that he has not chosen to appoint to the National Security Council any staff members with a true base of knowledge and interest in the issue. "I've met with NSC on several occasions," says Stockton, the former DOE official, "and they don't even know what the hell a weapons complex is."

Some presidents have managed DOE by vesting authority in strong energy secretaries, as Clinton did with the dynamic and high-profile Bill Richardson. Bush hasn't chosen to do that, either. (Quick: can you name the current Secretary of Energy? *)

The Department of Energy is also hampered by the longstanding culture of independence at the labs, which essentially allows each individual site to run itself. Former Los Alamos director Pete Nanos has spoken of a "cowboy culture," in which weapons scientists feel free to thumb their noses at Washington's efforts to exert control. In 2004, some Los Alamos scientists began sporting a bumper sticker on their cars bearing the words "Striving for a Work-Free Safe Zone." The message was a sarcastic rebuke to lab directors, whose new safety-conscious approach—the result of pressure from DOE officials in Washington —was, the scientists felt, short-changing scientific research. Stockton says that in his experience as a top DOE official, when you tell employees at the facilities, "we want you to do this, they pretty much give you the finger, saying 'we be here before you, we be here after you, and fuck you while you're here.'"

But even if DOE were able to rein in the labs, it's by no means certain that it would want to. In the 1990s, Congress was able to create the Base Realignment and Closure Commission to shut down military bases because the Defense Department supported the move. Officials understood that fewer bases around the country meant more resources and funding for their preferred projects. But DOE has much less influence in Congress than does the Pentagon, so there's no guarantee that money no longer given to the weapons complex would go to other departmental projects. Just as important, DOE simply doesn't do much aside from manage our weapons complex. It doesn't actually produce energy—it merely subsidizes private producers. In fact, NNSA represents almost 40 percent of the Energy Department's annual budget, and provides much of its sense of departmental mission. A diminished complex means a diminished DOE.

Political pressure for reform, then, is almost surely not going to come from DOE —at least with the way the department is currently structured. The only way to create that pressure is to radically change the structure. One idea would be to remove NNSA from DOE's (theoretical) control and instead place it under the more powerful Defense Department, which has shown its willingness to fight hard for the closing of unnecessary facilities it controls. There's virtually no will, however, in the Pentagon or in Congress, to push for such a move.

Another idea —one that might appeal to Democrats looking for a campaign issue—would be to give the Energy Department a new mission. Ramp up its authority to fund alternative energy experiments, but require that the funds come from more efficient management of the weapons labs. The only way to extract the necessary billions, of course, would be to close extraneous nuclear facilities.

The need to find alternatives to Middle Eastern oil is arguably the greatest national security challenge of the current era, just as deterring Soviet communism was half a century ago. How fitting it would be if the great weapons facilities that so vitally served the nation in the past could be restructured to serve the future as well. ◆

*—Additional reporting by Sam Jaffe*

*Answer: Samuel W. Bodman



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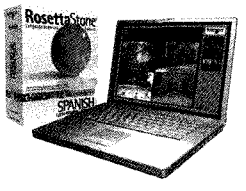


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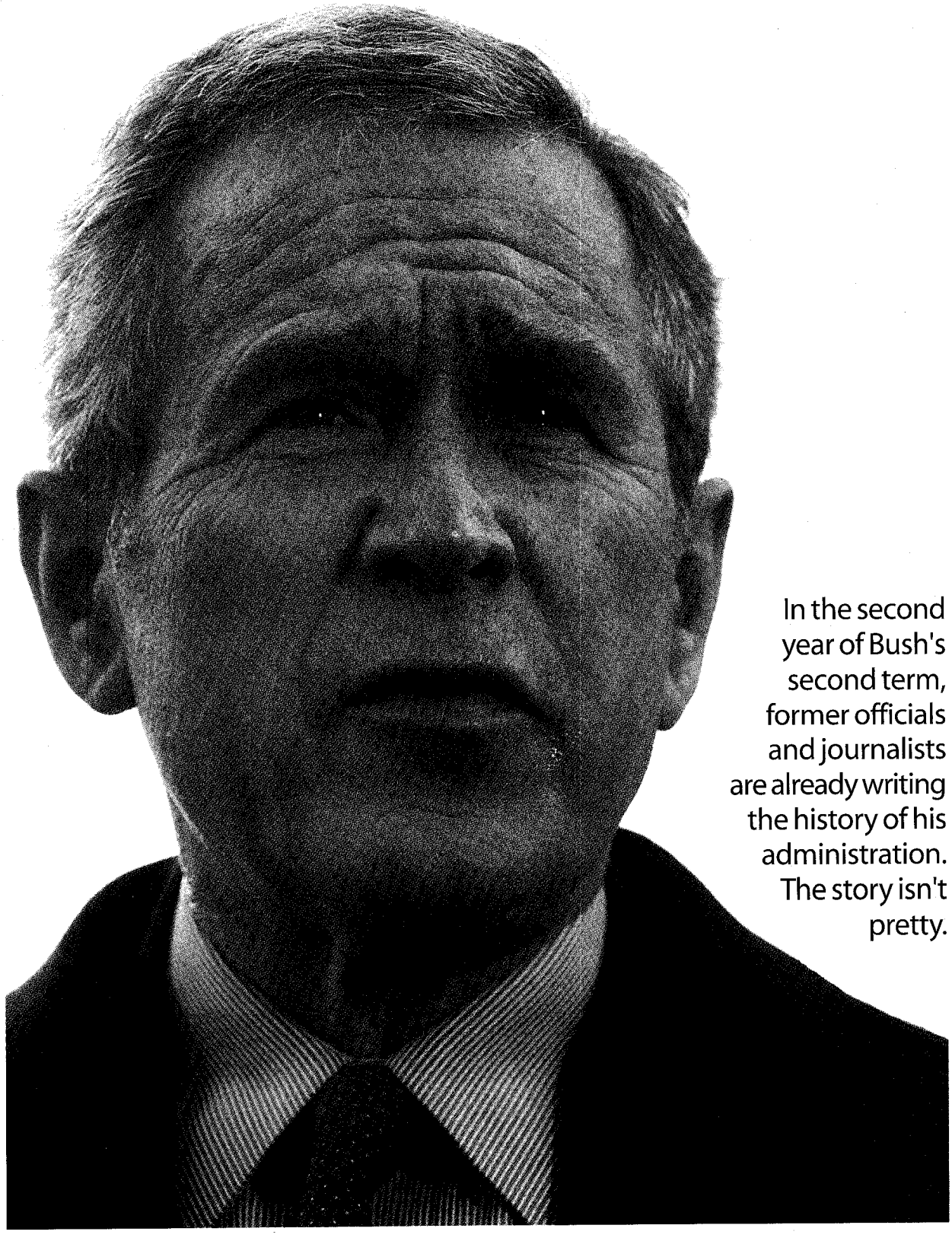
# All The President's Enablers



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In the second year of Bush's second term, former officials and journalists are already writing the history of his administration. The story isn't pretty.



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# George W. Bush is no Ronald Reagan

## Kevin Drum on *The Impostor*

There was a period stretching roughly from August 2003 through November 2004 when it was nearly impossible to walk through a branch of Barnes & Noble without tripping over half a dozen stacks of books explaining why George Bush was the most disastrous president in U.S. history. Al Franken had a book. Eric Alterman and Mark Green had a book. Arianna Huffington had a book. So did Molly Ivins, Joe Conason, and David Corn.

I read two or three of these tomes before I got bored and stopped. It turned out the bill of particulars was pretty much the same from book to book, and since I already agreed that Bush was an unusually bad president—in fact, my daily job at *The Washington Monthly* was frequently dedicated to illustrating just that point—there hardly seemed much sense in proving the law of diminishing returns by continuing to read every new screed that came out.

In any case, America finally held its presidential election in 2004 and the market for Bush-bashing books promptly ebbed for a time while shell-shocked liberals tried to figure out just what had hit them. It was, once again, safe to stroll leisurely through your local bookstore.

Predictably, it didn't take much time for the tide to turn back, and in early 2006, another Bush-bashing book hit the stands. The charges leveled against the president were familiar: reckless spending increases, out-of-control deficits, relentless pandering to business interests, and a deliberate and willful contempt for policy analysis. The Bush White House, it argued, judges legislation not by whether it's conservative or liberal, but solely by whether it will gain the Republican Party a couple of percentage points of support among some voting bloc or other. Principle is nothing. Politics is everything.

In other words, more of the same. Except for one thing: The author of *Impostor* (Doubleday, $26.00) is Bruce Bartlett, a former Reagan-era official and longtime conservative columnist. In fact, until last year —when he was fired for writing this book—he was a senior fellow at the Dallas-based National Center for Policy Analysis, a right-wing think tank dedicated to flat taxes, Social Security privatization, and a host of other conservative hot buttons.

Put in plain terms, Bartlett's charge is simple. George W. Bush, he says on page one, is a "pretend conservative." Philosophically, Bush actually has more in common with liberals than he does with true conservatives.

Now, there's not much question that this is overstated. Bush won't be getting an invitation to join *The New York Times* editorial board any time soon. Among other things, he's appointed hundreds of conservative judges, cut taxes repeatedly and dramatically, signed into law a ban on partial-birth abortions, and committed America to its biggest and costliest war of choice since Vietnam.

And yet, in a narrower but still provocative way, Bartlett makes a persuasive case. I'm a pretty conventional FDR liberal myself, but several years ago, I came to the same conclusion Bartlett did: Bush may be a Republican—boy howdy, is he a Republican—but he's not the fire-breathing ideologue of liberal legend.

Don't believe it? Consider Bartlett's review of Bush's major domestic legislative accomplishments. He teamed up with Ted Kennedy to pass the No Child Left Behind Act, which increased education spending by over $20 billion and legislated a massive new federal intrusion into local schools. He co-opted Joe Lieberman's proposal to create a gigantic new federal bureaucracy, the Department of Homeland Security. He has mostly abandoned free trade in favor of a hodgepodge of interest-group-pleasing tariffs. And after initially opposing it, Bush signed the Sarbanes-Oxley bill with almost pathetic eagerness in the wake of the Enron debacle, putting in place a phonebook-sized stack of new business regulations.

Want more? He signed the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill, a *bête noir* of conservatives for years. His Medicare prescription-drug bill was the biggest new entitlement program since the Great Society. He initially put a hold on a wide range of last-minute executive orders from the Clinton administration, but after a few months of "study" allowed nearly all of them to stand. And he has increased domestic discretionary spending at a higher rate than any president since LBJ.

Bartlett even has a bone to pick with the most prominent feature of Bush's record that's incontestably conservative, his almost religious dedication to tax cuts. Yes, Bush has cut taxes. Yes, that's generally a good, conservative thing to do. But as Bartlett correctly points out, cutting taxes without cutting spending doesn't do the conservative cause any good. Bush and the modern Republican Party plainly have no interest in cutting federal spending, and the resulting massive deficits will eventually force "the largest tax increase in American history"—one that will be entirely Bush's fault. Some conservative.

To be sure, there are plenty of counterarguments to these charges that Bartlett doesn't address. NCLB may increase education funding, but it also contains stealth provisions designed to increase support for school vouchers in future years. Bush may have signed DHS into existence, but only after using it as an excuse for a bitterly partisan round of union bashing and

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traitor mongering. The Medicare bill may have been an entitlement increase, but it also contained plenty of business-friendly provisions that made liberals—and conscientious conservatives—gag. And a tax cut is a tax cut, even if it's not the precise kind of tax cut Bartlett would prefer.

Still, open-minded liberals who want to understand the nature of contemporary American politics should give serious consideration to Bartlett's argument: Despite five years of seething anger at George Bush's supposed hardcore conservatism, the fact is that he's not really a hardcore conservative.

So what is Bush, then? This is where things get a little more confusing. As it turns out, Bartlett has about half the answer right, but there's more to the story than he seems willing to acknowledge.

For starters, it's worth conceding that there is more than one legitimate definition of "conservative." I've long viewed George Bush as a temperamental conservative, the kind of guy you meet in a bar who slams down his drink and asks belligerently, "You know what this country needs?"—and then proceeds to tell you. He's a conservative who is defined by a visceral loathing of '60s-era "moral decay," not one who's read the collected works of Russell Kirk and Milton Friedman or who has been inhaling *National Review* since he was a teenager. Still, even if the guy in the bar is indeed one particular type of conservative, Bartlett makes the reasonable point that a conservative president needs to have at least a few vague guiding conservative principles, and those are hard to find in Bush. If you raise spending, increase tariffs, and create new entitlements without blinking an eye, even belligerence doesn't make you into a genuine conservative

This, then, is the half of the answer that Bartlett gets right: Bush, he says, is not so much a conservative ideologue as he is simply a politician who has taken tribal partisanship to levels not seen since the 19th century. Bush is relentless at fighting for what he wants, but it turns out that what he mainly wants is to increase the Republican majority and kick some Democratic ass. If that means he's "perfectly willing to jettison conservative principles at a moment's notice to achieve that goal"—which he obviously is—well, that's the price you pay for electoral victory, isn't it?

In other words, Bush is another Richard Nixon, a comparison that Bartlett spends an entire chapter on.

The first person to draw a parallel between Bush and Nixon was someone who knew Nixon well: then-*New York Times* columnist William Safire, who had been a speechwriter for Nixon. In a July 2003 column, Safire imagined a conversation with the late president, who spoke approvingly about Bush's strategy of moving left domestically while keeping the Republican base preoccupied with an external threat. Nixon had done this successfully with Vietnam and Bush was doing it with Iraq.

Although the popular perception of Nixon is still that of an archconservative who infuriated liberals, Bartlett reminds us that on domestic policy Nixon routinely caved in to public opinion and betrayed his conservative principles—for example, by creating the EPA, supporting enormous increases in Social Security, and proposing a guaranteed-incomes policy. Likewise, Bush spent nearly his entire first term talking tough but then caving in with barely a whimper to any interest group that might help him win a few more precious votes in 2004. Tariffs were enacted in order to appeal to steelworkers; the Medicare bill was designed to buy the votes of the elderly; and McCain-Feingold was signed in the hope that it would provide a temporary fundraising advantage for the Republican Party. If all of these actions were precisely the opposite of what a real conservative would do, so what? As Nixon might have said, don't you know there's an election coming up?

As far as all this goes, Bartlett's argument is a good one, and the Nixon comparison even provides a neat and underappreciated explanation for why liberals hate Bush so much. After all, it's possible to respect someone with whom you have a principled disagreement, but not so easy to respect someone whose only real principle is to crush anybody who gets in his way. (Bush's alter-ego, Karl Rove, summed up this philosophy within earshot of journalist Ron Suskind when he yelled to an aide about someone who had displeased him, "We will fuck him. Do you hear me? We will fuck him. We will ruin him. Like no one has ever fucked him!") As with Nixon, it's not really Bush's conservatism that gets liberals seething. In fact, it's just the opposite. It's precisely his lack of political principle, combined with a vengeful ruthlessness so dark it's scary, that makes liberals break out in hives.

But this is where the second half of the story kicks in, and it's a part of the story that Bartlett avoids. Like many a true believer on both right and left, he's convinced that Bush's opportunism has all been for nought. He didn't need to pander to all those special interests. He could have stayed faithful to the conservative creed and still won reelection.

In this, Bartlett is almost certainly wrong. Genuine conservatives have a grim electoral history, after all. Robert Taft lost to Eisenhower, Barry Goldwater got crushed by LBJ, and Bob Dole was never even a serious contender against Bill Clinton. Newt Gingrich was certain that conservatism had finally won the day in 1994, but five years later he left office a defeated man. And does anyone even remember Phil Gramm?

That leaves only Ronald Reagan, and it's true that Reagan campaigned and won as an unapologetic conservative. Unfortunately, this single example simply doesn't do the analytic heavy lifting that Bartlett thinks it does. The reality is that Reagan came along at a unique moment in history, a time when the country was exhausted from the perceived liberal excesses of the '60s and '70s and ready for a short breather, especially one delivered with Reagan's trademark optimism and sunniness. Reagan was a reaction to an era, not the father of a movement.

What's more, as Bartlett tacitly acknowledges, Reagan in practice wasn't as conservative as his supporters remember him being. Sure, he famously cut taxes in 1981, but he raised taxes in nearly every year after that—including corporate taxes. He took a stab at cutting Social Security, but backed off after losing seats in the 1982 election and ended up endorsing a conventional liberal solution that increased payroll taxes and created a massive trust fund. He reduced the growth of domestic spending, but he never eliminated the cabinet departments he had promised to eliminate. In fact, he even added a new one. And he supported expansion of the Earned



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Income Tax Credit, an important anti-poverty measure. The reason that even liberals look back on Reagan a little more fondly today than they did at the time is that, in the end, he turned out to be a fairly pragmatic guy. (For more on this, see "Reagan's Liberal Legacy," by Joshua Green, January/February 2003.)

This is the reality that true-believer conservatives—Bartlett among them—don't want to believe. For all the trash talking from right-wing leaders like Grover Norquist and Tom DeLay, the fact is that America is only a moderately conservative country. And despite the electoral success of conservatives over the past decade, that hasn't changed much. Although party affiliations have shifted as Southern conservatives have migrated to the GOP, Harris polls since the early 1970s show that Americans self-identify as about 20 percent liberal, 35 percent conservative, and the rest in between, and those numbers have been rock-steady for decades. So where's the conservative revolution?

The answer is that it almost certainly never existed. Americans may not be ready for European-style soft socialism, but poll after poll demonstrates that they like Social Security and Medicare, they support iconic liberal programs in areas like environmentalism and worker safety, and they're pretty tolerant on social issues—and getting more tolerant over time, not less. George Bush couldn't have bucked these trends even if he'd wanted to, which is why he campaigned as a "compassionate conservative" and frequently gave speeches in which observers could have been forgiven for thinking they were hearing the reincarnation of FDR. Even at that, though, he only barely won. Hardcore conservatism simply doesn't sell in America.

What's more, it's never really been the governing philosophy of the Republican Party anyway. Bartlett usefully points out, for example, that Bush is "incapable of telling the difference between being pro-business and being for the free market," and he's right that this is a distinction that's seldom acknowledged. As Bartlett puts it, "Genuine supporters of free markets. . . denounced just as strongly government policies that subsidize businesses as those that unfairly penalize them." In other words, they believe in real competition. But Bush's Medicare bill didn't promote free-market competition; it simply tossed benefits at pharmaceutical companies. Likewise, his energy bill was stuffed with giveaways for utilities and oil companies, his transportation bill was a pork fest that would have made Boss Tweed blush, and his bankruptcy bill was little more than an out-and-out payoff to the credit card industry.

This is far from being an aberration. The current incarnation of the GOP may have taken interest-group pandering to new levels, but Bartlett fails to acknowledge that the Republican Party has long been more faithful to the pro-business creed than the pro-market one. Ronald Reagan's 1986 tax-reform bill may indeed have been a rare instance of high-minded, bipartisan tax policy—and a surprisingly progressive one—but the very reason it's so celebrated is because such things are so rare. After all, didn't Reagan also preside over the savings-and-loan debacle, surely the largest giveaway of all time to the wealthy business class that funds the Republican Party?

Like it or not, the pay-to-play machine built by Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay and Jack Abramoff—and enthusiastically supported by George Bush—is the apotheosis of what the Republican Party has always been about, not a betrayal of its principles. There is no primitive conservatism to go back to, and no messiah to lead the Republican Party out of its corporate welfare wilderness.

In the end, this is what Bartlett doesn't—or can't—get. Ideological activists may be loath to acknowledge this, but the truth is that today both major political parties are largely stuck. On the left, the problem is that liberals have achieved the bulk of what they set out to achieve 75 years ago, and the country is pretty happy with it. In the arena of economic security, they've given us Social Security, unemployment insurance, Medicare, subsidized public education, welfare, and the minimum wage. Equal rights? We've got the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, affirmative action, gender discrimination laws, the Violence Against Women Act, and the ADA. Abortion is legal, forced prayer is gone from public schools, and criminal defendants are guaranteed a lawyer. In the area of protection from corporate predation, we've got OSHA, workers comp, loads of environmental regulations, consumer-protection laws by the bushel, and capital markets that are more transparent than ever in history. Sure, there's more to do, but that's not bad. There just aren't very many big-ticket items left with the potential to generate a lot of voter excitement.

In the same vein, the problem on the right is that conservatives have failed miserably whenever they've tried to take a serious chainsaw to modern liberalism. Cutting taxes is just about all they have left, and as Bartlett concedes, taxes can't be cut forever. This has mostly reduced conservatives to nibbling modestly around the edges of the contemporary liberal edifice while simultaneously passing out enough goodies to keep their supporters happy and the rubes, if not happy, at least scared enough to keep voting for them. This means that unlike the '30s or the '60s, when politics was vitriolic because the stakes were high and society was undergoing dramatic changes, the source of today's vitriol is precisely the opposite. As with World War I trench warfare, it's the result of two evenly matched sides beating each other bloody year after year but neither being able to claim victory. Bill Clinton couldn't get national health care passed, but George Bush couldn't gut Social Security either.

Although the heat of battle often obscures this, the unhappy reality is that modern American politics is mostly played at the margins. In practical terms, we're no longer fighting seriously over grand principle, we're just fighting over who gets the most toys. The fact that *Impostor*—perhaps unwittingly—lays this so bare makes it a worthwhile read not just for its intended conservative audience, but for liberals as well. If progressives ever want to break our current political stalemate, they're going to have to open a new front. ◆



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# Ronald Reagan was no George W. Bush

## Carl Cannon on *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination*

Richard Reeves is a throwback, a journalist who unabashedly calls himself a liberal (most of us are—we just deny it) and who counts on two things from his readers. The first is that this disclaimer fulfills its exculpatory purpose. Reeves volunteers in the introduction to this book that Ronald Reagan "did not change my liberal mind, and I did not dent his conservatism." This admission leaves Reagan-lovers free to factor that caveat into their assessment of Reeves's writing. The second understanding Reeves has with his audience is that we are supposed to know that, whatever his politics, his real loyalty is to his craft, to getting the story right.

That this tacit agreement can be self-serving is self-evident. That it may be a dated and doomed pre-blogosphere convention is the subject of another essay. For the purposes of this review, suffice to say that there are enough of us out there who know Reeves's previous work, who respect him, and who know that saying a few good things about the 40th president of the United States does not make a guy a neocon.

In *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (Simon & Schuster, $30.00), Reeves has plenty of good things to say about the great champion of conservatism, although a better way to put it is that Reeves lets the story of Reagan's eight years in the White House unfold organically. Sometimes the old actor comes across as insightful and uncommonly effective, the best of American idealism. Sometimes he comes across as antediluvian and inflexible—the embodiment of that "tired old man" whom, as Don Henley sang, "we elected king." In other words, this book reads like an honest portrait of an important president of whom liberals were not fond in his time, but who looks better with each passing year.

Why? For starters, Ronald Reagan never took his suit coat off in the Oval Office, let alone his pants. Nor did he indulge himself with self-serving observations about his own style of leadership, or perhaps more significantly, launch a preemptive war—unless one counts the invasion of the little island of Grenada. And Reagan definitely did not boast of using his "political capital," although he certainly could have.

Reagan ran in a three-man race in 1980—and earned 51 percent of the vote. In a two-man race in his reelection effort, Reagan won 59 percent of the votes. Bill Clinton, by contrast, captured the presidency with 43.5 percent of the vote in a three-man race, and garnered 49 percent of the vote in his reelection bid four years later against Bob Dole and Ross Perot. George W. Bush? Don't get me started. He took office in 2000 as a 48-percent president without winning a plurality of the vote, and in 2005, he treated his 51-48 reelection margin as some kind of landslide. Reagan never promised to be a "uniter" instead of a "divider," and he was neither. He did, however, court Democrats assiduously on his tax-cutting budget bill, and kept his word not to campaign against Democrats who supported it.

Reeves's narrative style does not lend itself to such contrasts—I don't believe George W. Bush is mentioned in this book once—but those who wonder where Reeves would come down in a comparison between the 40th and 43rd presidents have not been reading the author's syndicated column. (Recent samples: "President Bush: I am the Law!" or "Is George Bush the Worst President Ever?")

Lest we get too nostalgic, however, Reaganomics remains a difficult dish to swallow whole. Reagan ran in 1980 on a promise to balance the cut taxes, build up the military, and balance the federal budget. Those goals were incompatible, and Reagan's priorities became clear when he blew a hole in the federal deficit, leaving literally trillions of dollars in national debt to future generations.

Other Reagan priorities were troubling to liberals then and remain so today. Classifying catsup as a "vegetable" for purposes of complying with school lunch nutritional programs, as the Reagan administration did, was little more than a public relations gaffe, but the media seized on it because it was a symbol for something real: Reagan's proposed (and in some cases effectuated) spending cuts in inner -city housing, poverty-intervention plans, mass transit, legal services and other programs that benefit the neediest among us — most especially AIDS patients, whom Reagan didn't acknowledge publicly for years.

And while Reagan always bristled when adversaries suggested a racist motive to any of his policies or statements, he exhibited insensitivity about racial and ethnic imagery in several high-profile instances. The Cadillac-driving "welfare queen" invoked in Reagan's stump speeches was a real person, but launching his 1980 campaign in Philadelphia, Miss. —where three civil rights workers were slain in 1964 —at a time Barry Goldwater was championing states rights (and Reagan was championing Goldwater) was obtuse in the extreme. So was his decision, recounted meticulously in Reeves's book, to put German chancellor Helmut Kohl's feelings ahead of those of Holocaust survivors at a wreath-

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laying "reconciliation event" in Bitburg, at a West German cemetery that included Nazi soldiers who'd served in units of the murderous Waffen SS.

"My Dreyfus case," Reagan wrote in his diary. "The press is still chewing on this Bitburg business. I'll just keep praying."

Two years later, on another visit to Germany on the occasion of Berlin's 750th anniversary, Reagan was hoping to provide a worthy encore to John F. Kennedy's famous 1963 *Ich bin ein Berliner* speech. The communist bloc's response to that speech had been to build the Berlin Wall, and Reagan now wanted to call on Mikhail Gorbachev to dismantle it. Conventional thinkers on the White House payroll, including chief of staff Howard Baker, deemed this impulse counterproductive and argued against it. Reeves recreates the final prep session between Reagan and speechwriter Peter Robinson.

Reagan: Now, I'm the president, aren't I?

Robinson: Yes sir!

Reagan: So I get to decide?

Robinson: Yes sir!

Reagan: Well, then, the line stays in.

Good thing, too. "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" was one of the most memorable utterances of the Reagan presidency, and hardly ineffectual.

Reeves's book relates another example of Reagan's superior political instincts involving his fateful negotiations with Gorbachev—but from the other ideological direction. This came in 1985, in Geneva, at the end of their first summit. Top White House foreign-policy aides Jack F. Matlock Jr. and Robert C. "Bud" McFarlane stayed up until 4:30 a.m. on the last day trying to wait out their more conservative colleagues from the communications shop, Peggy Noonan and Patrick Buchanan. Matlock and McFarlane couldn't quite outlast them, so Noonan and Buchanan slipped three Gorby-bashing sentences into the final draft of Reagan's closing remarks. Reagan returned the rough copy to Buchanan with the three offending sentences crossed out.

"Pat, this has been a good meeting," he said. "I think I can work with this guy. I can't keep poking him in the eye."

Here's another story of Reagan's interaction with his aides, from the second term: Prior to his fifth State of the Union address, the White House staff was divided over what the president should say about AIDS. This was January of 1986, and though his budgets had begun to reflect the debt of the health crisis facing the nation, Reagan had discussed the crisis only once in a September 1985 news conference. The medical profession, leaders in the gay community, and health officials in Reagan's own administration wanted the president to speak out.

A battle raged inside the White House, not just over what the president should say about AIDS, but over the speech itself. Mostly this was a turf battle pitting the speechwriting shop, which wanted to do its thing, against White House chief of staff Don Regan and those loyal to him, who wanted to assert their prerogative (and not have the president mention the disease at all). The spat was interrupted by tragedy: The morning it was scheduled, the space shuttle Challenger blew up, killing all aboard. Reagan spoke that day, but only about the six astronauts and a schoolteacher named Christa McAuliffe.

**Reagan managed often to outflank his own staff. Sometimes, however, the staff outfoxed him, and not always to bad results.**

The following week, Reagan gave his State of the Union, and it did not have the word AIDS in it. To consolidate his authority, Regan then fired longtime chief speechwriter, Bently Elliot, a talented and self-effacing Reaganaut who has never been given his proper due. But Reagan, who had not been apprised of Elliot's sacking, circumvented "the mice" (the nickname for Regan's minions) by emphasizing the fight against AIDS the next day during a presentation on his budget.

"One of our highest public health priorities is going to be continuing to find a cure for AIDS," Reagan said in a surprise visit to Health and Human Services headquarters. "I'm asking the Surgeon General to prepare a major report to the American people on AIDS."

Thus did Reagan manage, albeit belatedly, to outflank his own staff. Sometimes, however, the staff outfoxed him, and not always to bad results.

The same week as the AIDS remarks, voting began in the Philippines "snap" elections that would force the Reagan administration's hand on the festering problem of Ferdinand Marcos. A consensus had developed at the State Department, the Pentagon, in Congress, and even among top National Security Council staff in Reagan's own White House, that continuing to prop up Marcos was unprincipled—and unwise. Contrary to the myths that Marcos perpetuated about himself, the Filipino strongman was in reality a shirker (he hadn't fought the Japanese during World War II as he claimed), a master thief (he and his wife stole $1 billion, much of it U.S. aid), and a despot (he routinely rigged elections) who provided the rallying cry for a communist insurgency raging in the outlying islands of the archipelago.

Reagan was slow to accept this view, even in the face of abundant evidence. But advisers such as Richard Armitage at the Pentagon, George Shultz and Michael Armacost at State, and Republican senators Richard Lugar and Paul Laxalt kept a steady drumbeat of gentle pressure on the president. The aging autocrat moved up the timetable for elections to placate Washington, but Marcos outsmarted him-



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self: The 1986 elections were so rife with corruption that even Reagan, after days of balking, was nudged by his staff into tacitly acknowledging Corazon Aquino's rightful claim to power.

It was Laxalt who gave Marcos the bad news: Reagan was pulling the plug, and the United States would airlift Marcos and his family to safety, but that was all.

If you were writing a Reagan book and had dwelt on these case studies of Reagan's leadership, as Dick Reeves did, you might have been tempted to make the following observation: When Reagan got bad advice from his staff, he ignored it; and when he got good advice, he followed it. Perhaps there's another pattern at work, but Reeves engages in little of this kind of analysis. So little, that at times some readers might wonder why they are reading this book. Reeves did not cover Reagan. Nor does he have any peculiar pet theories to peddle (Reagan was gay! Reagan was manic-depressive! Reagan believed blacks were inferior to whites!) the way revisionists go on about Lincoln.

So what is Reeves doing?

The cynical answer might be that, despite being in his late 60s, Reeves still likes to make money and see his name in print. Why not? He's still got his fastball, and with Social Security facing bankruptcy with the prospect of 75 million baby boomers approaching their golden years, he's an inspiration—and a foreshadowing to all our futures. The less flippant answer is that Reeves has a formula for chronicling presidents that has worked in the past. "I am interested," Reeves says, "in what he knew and when he knew it, what he actually saw and did—sometimes day by day, sometimes hour by hour, sometimes minute by minute." Reeves is talking here about Reagan, but this was his approach to two previous acclaimed books, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (1993) and *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (2001).

It's a method that works less well with this book. For one thing, Reagan was president nearly as long as Kennedy and Nixon combined, and Reeves has to pick his spots—he can't simply write a day-to-day account for eight tumultuous years. Also, this narrative approach doesn't always catch the drama of the events Reeves is describing.

Reeves correctly identifies Reagan as a man of ideas, but Reagan was also a master storyteller who consciously made up soaring anecdotes to illustrate his ideas—the main one being that American exceptionalism is alive and well and a good thing. As such, Reagan demands biographers who will take a step back and try to tell grand truths along with him. Except in the introduction and the afterword, Reeves is hesitant to do that.

To be sure, he has reasons to be reticent: Official biographer Edmund Morris (handpicked by Nancy Reagan) tried the dramatic approach, and it ran off with him. Morris produced a deeply weird fictionalized account with himself as a contemporary of Reagan's. *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani, who panned Reeves's Reagan book as a "sorry disappointment," believes the mystery of the Gipper simply eluded Reeves's grasp, just as he did Morris's. That is too harsh, in my judgment, but it is fair to say that Reeves's fly-on-the-wall style contrasts with the sweet mood music, scripted plot points, spectacular falls from grace, character arcs, grand dénouements, comic hero bravery, and low cowardice of the epic movie that was the Reagan presidency.

To be sure, there are villains in Reeves's piece. Heroes, too, some of them unlikely. Many Americans know that after being shot by a would-be assassin, Reagan quipped to the operating surgeon, "I hope you're a Republican." But the line that produces a lump in the reader's throat is the rejoinder from Dr. Joseph Giordano, a Democrat: "Mr. President, we're all Republicans today."

Speaking of everyday heroes—Reagan himself couldn't make this stuff up—to the answer to the great question of who ended the Cold War, add the name Duke Zeibert. Reeves sets the scene nicely: It is mid-December, 1987, and Gorbachev, in Washington for the third of his momentous summits with Reagan, is in a limo with Vice President George Bush, who says, "It's too bad you don't have time to go into one of these stores or greet people."

"Stop the car!" shouts Gorbachev. Then, before Bush or the Secret Service can do a thing about it, Gorby is mingling with Christmas shoppers on Connecticut Avenue, shaking hands like a rock star, and waving to Zeibert, who stands on the balcony of his second-floor restaurant, shouting down to the Russian to come up to his place for a bowl of borscht.

This is the kind of detail Reeves specializes in. He was not there, but he availed himself of everything from White House pool reports to now-unclassified notes of the U.S.-Soviet summits. Reeves also interviewed participants from both governments, talked to numerous White House officials, and cites an impressive number of the 900-odd Reagan books that have been published. But if this is not *President Reagan for Dummies*, it is not a book for presidential scholars, either. Reeves has no real first-person experiences with Reagan; nor can he explore any one subject in detail, the way, say, Jack Matlock does in *Reagan and Gorbachev*.

In the end, though, Reeves's straightforward, nearly chronological narrative succeeds. The reason this is so is that the author has retreated to his original craft, reporting, and the detail in *The Triumph of Imagination*, large and small, makes itself compelling. In 1981 (Chapter 5), we chuckle as Reeves relates how House Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., on his Cape Cod vacation, watched news clips of Reagan clearing brush at his ranch in California. O'Neill, two years younger than Reagan, tried it himself —and found that after 15 minutes he "could barely breathe or walk." In 1983 (Chapter 7), we smile along with the 72-year-old president as he subtly suggests during a speech on physical fitness that he is still sexually active. And in 2004 (the Afterword), we sigh as Nancy Reagan confides in Reeves that her husband did not once open his eyes in the last four years of his life.

In these days of excess partisanship, we readers, we citizens, are well-reminded to keep our own eyes open when it comes to our presidents, regardless of whether we voted for them or not. Much rides on it, and the truth lies somewhere in between the success of their grand visions and the day-to-day details of their lives. ◆



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# Paul Bremer was just following instructions

## Michael Hirsh on *My Year in Iraq*

Paul Bremer III inspires fierce loyalty and affection in many of the people who have worked for him. It's no surprise why. Bremer is, by all accounts, a truly decent man: a devoted husband and father, a devout Catholic who kept framed on his desk in Baghdad the Latin inscription *non sum dignus*, or "I am not worthy." During his 13-month tenure as America's viceroy in Iraq, Bremer was good-humored and cool under fire, venturing out more than many other U.S. officials from the Green Zone, always nattily attired in his blue blazer (no flak jacket for him) and Timberland boots. Despite a reputation for hauteur in some quarters—especially at the United Nations—he possessed all the lineaments of the classic American diplomat, with that winning combination of brilliance and self-effacement—not to mention lean good looks and Kennedy-esque thatch of hair—that is so much a part of the patrician tradition going back to Dean Acheson, Henry Stimson, and John McCloy. "He's a man of extraordinarily high intelligence and integrity," Henry Kissinger, whose international consulting business Bremer once managed, told me in January 2004. "I've never met anyone with higher sense of public service."

All of which raises an important question: How did a guy of Bremer's obvious talents screw up so badly in Iraq?

Or did he?

It is now conventional wisdom among the chattering classes that Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq was a "disastrous" affair, as *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, in one of his weekly rants, termed it. Republicans and neocons disavow Bremer because they believe his incompetence may have cost the president his legacy; Democrats and liberals demean Bremer because they think he drank the Bush Kool-Aid about democracy without knowing much about Iraq. Most of all, Bremer is condemned for making a pair of catastrophic decisions right out of the box: calling for blanket de-Baathification of the Sunnis as his first order of business, then disbanding the Sunni-led Iraqi army as his second order, thus setting in motion the Sunni insurgency. Indeed, these criticisms today seem programmed into every journalist's keyboard (just press "F1"). Bremer is an especially easy target in Washington because, unlike, say, Donald Rumsfeld, he rarely responds publicly.

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Now, at last, we have Bremer's response, his memoir *My Year in Iraq* (Simon & Schuster, $27.00). It is well worth reading. As this fast-moving, if rather dry, narrative makes clear, the picture of Bremer's brief turn as a latter-day MacArthur (though Bremer casts himself more in the mold of the quiet McCloy, postwar administrator of Germany) is more complicated than the Beltway conventional wisdom has it. Far from being another Bush ideologue—though he firmly believed in the Iraq mission and is still loyal to the president—Bremer is better seen as the advance guard of the Bush II damage control team. These are the pragmatic second-term officials—like Gordon England at Defense, and Robert Zoellick, Nicholas Burns, and the passel of career diplomats Condoleezza Rice has hired for senior positions at State—who are now trying to clean up the mess left by the first-term ideologues. Led by Rice, who, while she was part of the problem in the first term, has blossomed as secretary of state, the damage control team has dispersed the neocons, who have been forced out, indicted, or isolated in stress positions (for example, Defense's William Luti, once of the Office of Special Plans cabal, is now kept under wraps at Stephen Hadley's National Security Council). And in their sheer numbers, the new pragmatists have blunted the power of Vice President Dick Cheney, once the fulcrum of foreign policy, and turned the tetchy Rumsfeld into a "potted plant," as my *Newsweek* colleague Fareed Zakaria aptly called him.

Bremer was, in retrospect, probably the early harbinger of these fixer-uppers. "Baghdad was burning" is the opening line of his book, describing his flight under fire into Iraq on May 12, 2003—a little over a month after the fall of the capital city—and he makes it clear that his principal job was to rescue something successful and enduring out of the Pentagon's pitiably poor planning as the Iraqi insurgency took off.

Bremer's book is a pure narrative from start to finish—the last page has him stepping onto his helicopter to depart for good on June 28, 2004—with almost no effort at self-reflection. He simply chooses not to directly address many of the criticisms one hears lodged against him: that the CPA was largely staffed by young Republican ideologues with little expertise; or that the occupation authority made little effort to stem rampant corruption in the contracting process (as the CPA's own former inspector general, Stuart Bowen, concluded in a withering critique). Still, it is clear that some of the criticism clearly stung more than others: for example, the charge that he was arrogant and unilateralist and did not



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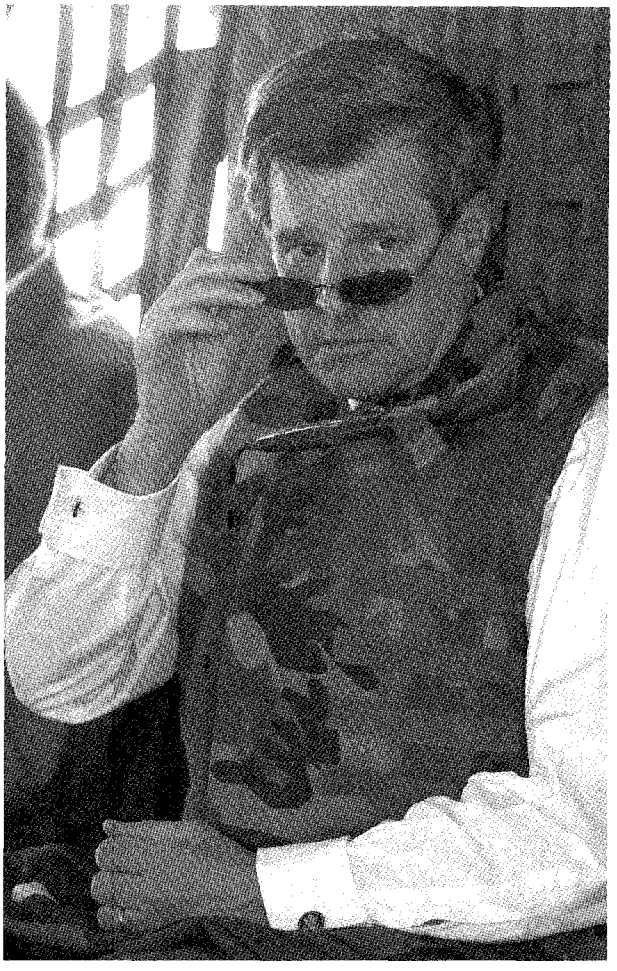

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understand the importance of figures like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. To rebut that perception Bremer peppers the text with the many mediated contacts he had with al-Sistani.

It's also clear that one of his principal goals is to shift some of the blame—especially to Donald Rumsfeld. Along the way we learn just how disengaged Rumsfeld's Pentagon was from "Phase IV" Iraq—everything that was supposed to happen after U.S. forces took Baghdad. Bremer's book will do lasting damage to Rummy's already crumbling reputation. In the first pages, before he even left for Iraq, Bremer writes of his shock at reading a RAND study that had recommended an occupation force of 500,000 troops, then leaving a copy of it for Rumsfeld with a cover note urging him to consider it. "I never heard anything back from him," Bremer writes. As things grow worse, Rumsfeld continues to ignore his requests for more troops, and top generals such as Rick Sanchez are simply too cowed—or too worried about their next star—to confront the bullying defense secretary with their real needs. Bremer writes about a private meeting he has with Sanchez, then the top commander in Iraq, in May 2004, in which it is clear that the general has thought long and hard about the security problem. "'What would you do if you had two more divisions, Rick?' I asked him. He was a practical soldier who didn't normally speculate about the hypothetical when there were so many concrete problems to address each day. But he answered immediately. 'I'd control Baghdad.'"

Bremer makes much of his persistent warnings to everybody who would listen about the Pentagon's reckless tendency to overstate the readiness of Iraqi security forces; his constant demands that the Pentagon take out the meddlesome Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr early (the Army meekly refused); and his regular admonitions that political progress would not be enough to stop the insurgency. If taken at his word, this account should help to restore some of his reputation. The book also shows, beyond any doubt, that some of the blame so routinely heaped on Bremer needs to be spread far more widely. His book makes plain—and this has been confirmed elsewhere—that Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary Douglas Feith both signed off on his troop decision; that the president wanted de-Baathification; and that both Bush and Rice failed to act on Bremer's concerns about the paucity of troops. They simply never give Bremer a clear answer, and he must return to the fight and make do with what he has.

The biggest disappointment of *My Year in Iraq* is that only very rarely does Bremer acknowledge any errors he might have made himself—and he clearly made plenty. (As with all the God-invoking Bushies, one sometimes wants to grab Bremer by the shoulders and quote Oliver Cromwell to him: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.") Indeed, the central question hanging over his tenure as Iraq's civil administrator is not so much about those early mistakes he is blamed for, at least taken individually. It is whether he should have understood sooner that Rumsfeld was just not going to commit the resources that he, Bremer, knew were needed to achieve Bush's mission: a top-to-bottom transformation of Iraq that included de-Baathification and a brand-new Iraqi security force.

Rumsfeld wanted a brief in-and-out occupation; Bush wanted a new model for the Mideast. The result is a tragic mismatch: an excess of vision paired with a scarcity of commitment, with Bremer left to arbitrate between the two. Perhaps he thought that Bush would do what presidents are supposed to do, which is take charge and remember that their defense secretaries work for them, not the other way around. But Bush wasn't engaged enough in the details to realize what was happening, ignoring the numerous hints about troops that Bremer dropped in his direction (at one point, Bremer writes, it becomes clear that Bush has misunderstood Rummy's troop withdrawal plans, thinking more soldiers would be sent in, but Bremer genteelly notes that "neither Rumsfeld nor I chose to correct the President in this forum.")

This was the moment, if there ever were one, for second thoughts. Bremer does in fact change course once: In the first months of his tenure, in the summer of 2003, he doggedly follows the protocol in postwar Germany—a new constitution guaranteeing rights first, then voting, and only after that sovereignty. But the bloody autumn of 2003 prods him to adopt an accelerated schedule—instead of a full-blown constitution, the occupation would now create an interim "transitional administrative law," then hand over sovereignty. It is not enough of a shift. And there is no evidence that, as the insurgency raged on and the troops were not forth-



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coming, Bremer ever had a real Kissingerian reckoning with himself, drawing the obvious conclusion: If we can't occupy this country satisfactorily, then we need to hand it over quickly. Instead he stubbornly proceeds with his long-term, paternalistic plans as if Rumsfeld has actually secured Iraq and he, Bremer, is actually John McCloy. These plans include an 18-month scheme for transferring sovereignty, a giant bureaucratic occupation authority planted in the middle of Baghdad, and a feckless handoff to U.S. multinationals such as Bechtel that lumbered blindly ahead, taking months to draw up environmental impact statements while the country's power supply foundered.

The problem, in other words, was not so much the separate decisions Bremer made: disbanding the army, blanket de-Baathification, and a smothering occupation. It was the cumulative impact that all these moves had in setting conditions for an angry insurgency in such a poor security environment. Bremer knew the old Iraqi army had largely dissolved (it is also clear, after two years of frustrating training efforts, that it was mostly incompetent). Yet Bremer also must have known—since his predecessor Jay Garner had told him—that some Iraqi units were beginning to drift back, identifying themselves to the Americans and looking for work (Garner had wanted to put them on reconstruction). Bremer must have known as well that the Pentagon had spent months before the war identifying Iraqi officers it could try to work with. Did it require such an act of imagination to realize that if Rumsfeld wasn't going to give him the troops, he needed to adjust on this issue and reach out to the Iraqis?

Bremer's myopia is also evident in his handling of one early opportunity for a fast transfer of sovereignty: the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council (GC). Bremer fights hard, rightly in my view, against the early Pentagon plan to install Ahmed Chalabi and a small group of exiles in charge. Instead he creates the GC by painstakingly and eloquently appealing to a broader group of Iraqis to come together. Yet after going to great lengths to form the GC, he makes clear he is giving it no real powers. And then he proceeds to disown and demean it, complaining of its "inertia" and short working hours. (Why should they work when they know he's the one in charge?) He ignores Chalabi when the latter warns him—with what now looks like prescience—that "by slowing down this political process, you risk giving the impression that America intends to stay a long time in Iraq." As the scholar Larry Diamond, one of Bremer's former subordinates, says in his 2005 book *Squandered Victory*, Bremer was too quick to dismiss Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's call for early elections, saying the country needed a new census and other formalities. But it may well have been practical, Diamond says, and taken some of the edge off Iraqi anger at the occupation. In his speech to the Council on Foreign Relations in December, Bush himself also acknowledged, implicitly, that Bremer's occupation had botched things by being too top-heavily American, especially in its use of contractors. After the speech, Bremer privately admitted this to friends. But such *mea culpae* do not appear in his book.

To give Bremer some credit, he was trying to reverse a rout—desperately seeking to leave something lasting behind in Iraq. Whether or not he had the resources, that goal could only be achieved by extirpating the Baath Party and giving Iraq a brand-new politics, rather than relying on the likes of Chalabi. Unfortunately for Bremer, de-Baathification got out of hand, and this, too, was hardly his fault entirely. Thanks to Chalabi's Pentagon-aided early arrival in post-Saddam Iraq—he actually was flown in before Garner was—his Iraqi National Congress got hold of the Baath Party files and the de-Baathification committee. The result was that, for too long, Chalabi was allowed to conduct a McCarthyite purge of any public official he pleased, including hundreds of lower-level officials whose only sin was to adhere to a Saddam-era requirement to join the only party in town. These excesses also clearly helped to generate Sunni support for the insurgents. Even so, in his book Bremer does not adequately address the issue of why he did not do more to rein in Chalabi.

For all the mistakes he made, however, it is also clear that Bremer eventually scaled his steep learning curve. By early 2004 he is beginning to focus intently on the permanent structures he could leave behind, especially a new constitution. Bremer's stubbornness serves him in good stead in this period as well. Especially during the crisis of March and April 2004—when everything seems to fall apart at once—he brilliantly juggles U.S. military demands to (at last) crush Moqtada al-Sadr, who has occupied Najaf, and to invade Fallujah, where four contractors have been brutally murdered, with political threats by the Governing Council to resign if these U.S. military efforts go too far. In the end, he negotiates a middle course, adopting an "Anaconda Plan" to squeeze al-Sadr's forces in Najaf while staying out of the mosques and deftly winning over the GC to his plan for an interim government. It is Bremer at his very best.

And whatever his portion of the blame, it must now be conceded that Bremer's political legacy—the new Iraqi government—is probably the main thing standing between the managed quagmire that is Iraq today and full-blown failed state status. Indeed Bremer's number one legacy, the interim constitution or Transitional Administrative Law, became the basic DNA of the new Iraq. It has determined the balance of power, created many of the parameters for the new constitution (except, most dangerously, for the autonomous powers given to separate regions), and set the deadlines for elections and constitutional referenda that, for better or worse, the administration has religiously adhered to in an effort to wind down Bush's Big Adventure. If Iraq falls apart or becomes a failed state, Bremer will undoubtedly get much of the blame. But if Bush—or his successors—ever can claim an acceptable outcome in Iraq, Bremer's achievements should get some of the credit. ◆



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# George Tenet chose appeasement

## Spencer Ackerman on *State of War*

It's a testimony to James Risen's ability as a reporter that his exposure of the most controversial national-security program in a generation is a relatively minor part of his explosive new book. Risen, along with his *New York Times* colleague Eric Lichtblau, broke the story in December that President Bush authorized widespread domestic surveillance, including the communications of American citizens, without court-issued warrants. If the surveillance program is legal—a dubious proposition, according to most constitutional lawyers—it is only barely so. Senators of both parties, alarmed by an initiative most of them knew nothing about, planned to hold hearings. Conservatives furious at the disclosure assailed the *Times* for jeopardizing national security to sell Risen's book—following the lead of Bush, who blasted Risen's exposé as a "shameful act."

But there isn't much more in *State of War* (Free Press, $26.00) about the warrantless eavesdropping program than what the *Times* has already published. Instead, there is a wealth of information and insight into how the intelligence community has been pushed by the Bush administration—and, in many cases, willingly jumped—into its own shameful acts. Far from being a narrowly focused depiction of a particular scandal, Risen documents how most of the fateful national-security decisions of the Bush administration—from the invasion of Iraq to the botched occupation to the maintenance of secret detention facilities overseas—can be traced to the hostile relationship between Bush and the intelligence community. In particular, it excoriates the CIA under George Tenet's leadership for sacrificing the agency's independence and what Risen calls its "gravitational force"—its ability to draw policy-makers away from mistaken or dangerous ideas and towards the agency's presumably more accurate view of the world—by yielding to the relentless pressure that the administration placed on it.

When the administration began centering its case for war against Saddam Hussein in 2002 on his phantom weapons of mass destruction, intelligence officials whispered to reporters that the administration pressured them to come up with information that supported the decision to invade Iraq. Administration officials have vociferously denied the charges for years, and you can understand why: The accusation suggests, at the very least, that the war's architects were more interested in selling the decision to invade than in assessing the actual threat from Saddam. National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley blasted "the notion that somehow this administration manipulated the intelligence" on Iraq and countered that "those people who have looked at that issue, some committees on the Hill in Congress, and also the Silberman-Robb Commission have concluded it did not happen."

It's true that the 2005 Silberman-Robb Commission report concluded that no analyst changed his assessment based on administration pressure. (The Senate Intelligence Committee report in June 2004, which did not look at how policymakers interacted with the intelligence community, nevertheless stated baldly that no one was pressured, a conclusion Democrats on the panel dispute.) But, like the Senate report, the story presented in the commission's conclusion casts doubt on that assertion. For instance, Paul Pillar, the National Intelligence Council's Middle East analyst, told the commission that "permeat[ing] the analytic atmosphere... [was] the gathering conviction among analysts that war with Iraq was inevitable by the time the [National Intelligence Estimate] was being prepared." The commission neither elaborates nor explains how that "analytic atmosphere" came to be, or what its effect was on the intelligence justifying the war.

Risen does. His book portrays pressure on the intelligence community from the administration as ranging from explicit to subtle and readily translated from senior CIA officials to their subordinates. It reaches far beyond Iraqi WMD. It traces back to what future intelligence historians may regard as among the most monumental bureaucratic blunders ever made by an intelligence chief.

That blunder was George Tenet's. Tenet, the head of both the CIA and the entire 15-agency, $40-billion intelligence community, attempted in 2000 to solve a structural problem with a personal maneuver. The structural problem was that the CIA, frequently assaulted from both the left and the right for much of its history, had lost its reason for being when the Cold War ended—and, as a result, lost much of its bureaucratic influence in the '90s. After Bush's victory in 2000, Tenet saw his chance. Risen vividly details how, in the hope of restoring the CIA to prominence, Tenet bound himself to Bush. Charmed by Tenet's gregariousness and towel-snapping machismo, Bush asked him to stay on as Director of Central Intelligence, thus denying Donald Rumsfeld the job.

Tenet made a Faustian bargain. Risen observes that in national security debates, the intelligence community, like

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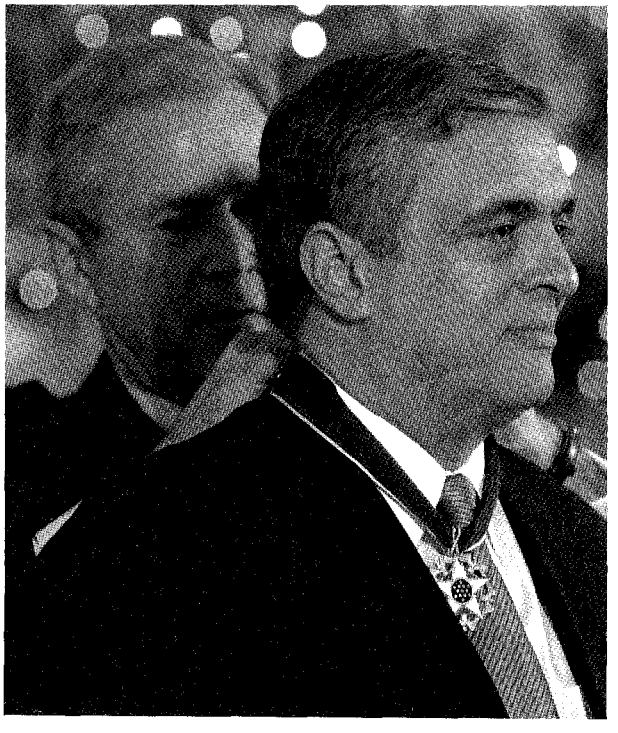
the bureaucracy as a whole, "does serve one purpose: It tends to weed out really stupid or dangerous ideas, unethical and even immoral ideas, ideas that could get people killed or could even start wars." But with Tenet betting the agency's status in the Bush administration on appeasing Bush, its independence—and therefore its potential to mitigate the self-deceptions to which any administration is vulnerable—was completely compromised. What's more, Tenet's pandering to Bush was actually counterproductive to maintaining the CIA's bureaucratic status: The CIA would quickly learn that in the hands of a radical administration, no amount of appeasement would ever suffice.

The effects manifested quickly. Risen charges that Tenet caved to Bush entirely on the torture of al-Qaeda detainees. After the 2002 capture of Abu Zubaydah, a bin Laden deputy, failed to yield much information due to his drowsiness from medical treatment, Bush allegedly told Tenet, "Who authorized putting him on pain medication?" Not only did Tenet get the message—brutality while questioning an enemy prisoner was no problem—but Tenet also never sought explicit White House approval for permissible interrogation techniques, contributing to what Risen speculates is an effort by senior officials "to insulate Bush and give him deniability" on torture. CIA operatives watched apprehensively, remembering the long history of presidents who authorize covert actions only to leave low-level field agents holding the bag when scandals surface.

Once Tenet supplicated himself to Bush—one of Tenet's former aides terms his old boss "a pussy"—the CIA was in no position to exert its influence on the policy toward Iraq. Pressure to ratify the invasion took a variety of forms, and



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Risen details them richly. When Hadley, now the national security adviser, instructed Tenet's deputy, John McLaughlin, "that the agency had to get over its dislike of [Ahmed] Chalabi," the Iraqi exile politician and neoconservative favorite who provided dubious Iraq intelligence to policymakers, "McLaughlin made it clear to Hadley that the CIA wouldn't stand in the way and passed the White House message back to CIA management." Similarly, when Paul Wolfowitz complained about the CIA's rejection of the debunked "connection" between Saddam and al Qaeda, an ex-Pentagon official tells Risen, "George would say that he would fix it."

In Risen's telling, Tenet "fixed it" vigorously. When senior CIA officials, fearful that invading Iraq would jeopardize the war on terror, took their concerns to Tenet, "He would just come back from the White House and say they are going to do it" no matter what, one ex-official tells Risen. As he writes, "Agency officials who appeared to be unenthusiastic about Iraq soon mysteriously found themselves sidelined, while their more eager and ambitious colleagues began to rise." A 2002 CIA meeting became a "pep rally" for the war: "The pressure from the Bush administration was being transmitted directly into the ranks of the nation's intelligence community."

CIA appeasement only emboldened its enemies. Here lies the difference between previous administrations and Bush's. While no policymaker accepts the CIA's judgments uncritically, neither did any of Bush's predecessors seek to cripple the agency outright. In an incident detailed in the Senate report, Jami Miscik, head of CIA analysis, pulled the agency's Mideast experts, who were dubious of an Iraq-al Qaeda connection, off an assessment of those ties entirely, leaving it to the more credulous terrorism analysts. But when even those analysts were constrained by the facts—the paper was subheadlined "Assessing a Murky Relationship"—the Pentagon's Douglas Feith had his analysts prepare a briefing for senior officials arguing that CIA skepticism should be ignored. The briefing, which sought to highlight "Fundamental Problems with How Intelligence Community is Assessing Information," suggested that the administration should shunt the CIA to the side on any issue in which it expressed inconvenient doubts.

Risen mines journalistic gold about the CIA's recent history with Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other flashpoints. But in his justifiable outrage at Tenet's pliability, he occasionally lets Bush off easy. About Iraq's WMD, he writes, "If someone had spoken up clearly and forcefully [to Bush], the entire house of cards might have collapsed." Risen qualifies this, suggesting that Bush might have still have "ignored the warnings." But it's hard to see how there's any doubt that he would have. The pressure Risen details existed for a reason: not just to enable the Iraq War, but to permanently neutralize the "gravitational force" that the CIA represents. No wonder that under the Bush administration the country drifts from one disaster to another. ◆



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# Torie Clarke advised "candor"

## Margaret Sullivan on *Lipstick on a Pig*

Torie Clarke, the former Pentagon communications chief who dreamed up and carried out the idea of embedding journalists with the American military in Iraq, has this to say about the current state of public relations: Spin is out. Truth is in. In her new book, *Lipstick on a Pig* (Free Press, $26.00), which is part memoir, part how-to, Clarke says that pulling the wool over people's eyes is no longer an option. With an increasingly skeptical press and an increasingly sophisticated public, transparency is the only way for politicians and corporations to get by. In short: The truth will get out, so stop trying to manage it. "I've learned over and over that sunshine trumps spin every time," she writes. "I return to that old aphorism: You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig. If you've got a pig on your hands—which is to say, a tough story—no lipstick can be laid on thick enough to cover up that fact."

Clarke's "spin is dead" theory is a little like Madonna's recent effort to convince the world she's really settling down now, and leaving the house only to go to kabbalah yoga class or pick up organic produce for the kids. It sounds semi-plausible, vaguely admirable, and may help to sell the product. But it strains credulity just a bit.

Certainly her message didn't seem to linger among her former employers (she left the Pentagon in 2003, citing personal reasons). Transparency and the Pentagon are just not words that go together, certainly not now. This is the same outfit, after all, that's been selling positive news stories in Iraq, and then stonewalling until it became impossible to deny. It may well be Clarke's personal belief that the truth—fast, straightforward, and no holds barred—is the way to handle every sticky situation. But it doesn't seem to have sunk in very far to the organization she served in such a high-profile way. Nor does such transparency seem to be the *modus operandi* of the boss, Donald Rumsfeld, she speaks so glowingly about. (Her admiration, by the way, is so incandescent that it reminds me of Peggy Noonan's rhapsodies over Ronald Reagan. Please, ladies. Let's leave our father complexes at the therapist's office.) And "openness" does not describe the way the larger Bush administration does business. With its efforts to subpoena reporters, narrow the Freedom of Information Act, and stamp "classified" on everything but the kitchen sink, this is probably the most secretive crowd that's been around in decades. One gets the feeling they'd just as soon forget the First Amendment and skip right on down to the Second.

Clarke herself, though, is a skillful PR practitioner who uses truth as her weapon of mass communication. Consider her big brainstorm: embedding American journalists with the troops in Iraq, a program that her bio says she "conceived, designed, and ran." From the administration's point of view, it's been a solid, if not perfect, public relations win. It looks like transparency and has resulted largely in extraordinarily positive press. For television reporters, particularly, there was a big Going Native factor. *Guardian* columnist Zoe Heller once described the fawning coverage as "reports delivered while riding shotgun on tanks, with the wind in their tousled locks, [accompanied by] cute conversations with the anchors about whether they're remembering to use their sunscreen or not."

But in addition to positive press, Clarke's brainstorm may have had another, more devious effect. One Washington print journalist of my acquaintance has come to believe that the embedding program so distracted reporters and news organizations with preparations to cover the fighting that it kept them from aggressively questioning the run-up to the war, particularly the reasons and justifications for it. Was that the Pentagon's intent? Perhaps that's too subversive a take on the whole thing. But then again, in the light of all things Valerie Plame, maybe it's not.

Either way, it was top-notch publicity for the Pentagon, proving that, as a communications wizard, Clarke is about as good as they get. As Sen. John McCain's press secretary in 1989, she helped him survive the potentially lethal Keating Five scandal, using a potent brew of forthrightness and political acumen. Her book, though, is less brilliant. Richly studded with war stories (literal and figurative), it is—at its best—an insightful glimpse inside the federal bureaucracy in extraordinary times. At its worst, though, it is superficial, verging on cutesy. She writes: "Since you've paid good money for this book—or at least I hope you have—I'll let you in on a little trade secret. Just don't tell any of my fellow communications consultants that I spilled the beans. Telling you what I'm about to tell you is like breaking the magicians' code. OK, dim the lights. Pull the shades. Listen carefully. Working with the media is not rocket science." Clarke goes on to offer the platitudes that the keys to good public relations are to be responsive, accurate, and truthful.

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The book's strongest moments come in Clarke's compelling tale of being in the center of the action at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Here, her theory of "get the truth out and get it out fast" worked admirably as a government and a nation struggled to understand an earth-shaking event. As the Pentagon's communications chief, with the Pentagon itself under attack, she was in the eye of the storm. "Within an hour of the attack, we began responding to the thousands of media inquiries with what information we had—which wasn't much. My instructions to our team were direct: They were to say nothing of which we weren't absolutely sure. At the same time, I was convinced we had to get as much information out there as possible.... The best antidote to panic was information."

Her approach was the right way to go—one that helped make the defense secretary (and his boss) appear competent and in control. It's unfortunate—sad, even—that Clarke's message hasn't penetrated deeper. And it's no surprise, perhaps, that she decided to leave an administration that so often does exactly what she says never to do. Clarke, meanwhile, is far too savvy, and probably loyal, to point that out. If asked about it directly, I wonder if she'd provide the raw truth or something that might be called spin? ◆

# Fred Barnes delivered the talking points

## Isaac Chotiner on *Rebel-in-Chief*

Fred Barnes, executive editor of *The Weekly Standard*, is one of those figures who drifts in and out of political consciousness: genial, conservative, always on television and rarely very memorable. But Barnes plays a particular, and to some quite important, role in the Washington media and political establishment. Where Bill Kristol may show more fealty to his conservatism than his president, or where Ann Coulter is too vitriolic for the good of her own side, you can always find Barnes calmly toeing the administration's line. When even Fox News panelists seemed uncomfortable with the administration's position on torture, there was Barnes defending the policy. When the president nominated Harriet Miers—and most conservative commentators and intellectuals rebelled—there was Barnes supporting the choice. He is the perfect Bush hack. Barnes's obsequiousness, on display in his new book, *Rebel-in-Chief: Inside the Bold and Controversial Presidency of George W. Bush* (Crown Forum, $23.95), is so deep it leaves you wondering what motivates it.

*Rebel-in-Chief*'s portrait of Bush is fawning and at times unintentionally amusing. It is also unlikely to change any partisan minds. What it does reflect is the startling conviction that movement Republicans—after five years of complete GOP control of every branch of government—somehow remain political underdogs in the nation's capital.

Barnes's readers are handed the dispiriting spectacle of a very experienced writer in pursuit of a very dubious thesis. The book has two ever-present goals, and they are not entirely distinct from each other. The first is to show that Bush is a brave leader, willing to trust his gut and do what he thinks is right. When Barnes meets the president in the Oval Office, we get this paragraph: "[Bush's] job, he told me, is to 'stay out of the minutiae...' To stress the point, Bush called my attention to the rug; he had been surprised, he said, to learn that the first decision a president is expected to make is what color the rug should be. 'I wasn't aware that presidents were rug designers,' he told me. So, he delegated the task, to Laura. Typical of his governing style, though, he gave a clear principle as guidance: He wanted the rug to express the view that an 'optimistic person comes here.' The rug she designed is sunrise yellow." Lest the reader miss the point, Barnes inserts some helpful exposition: "Bush is a big picture person, eager to concentrate on major issues and delegate smaller ones. That explains why he let Laura design the Oval Office rug."

Having framed Bush as a man of principle in matters of interior design, Barnes wants to argue that this characteristic also explains his domestic policies. The huge spending binge of the last five years presents a problem for conservative defenders of Bush. There are two honest ways for them to address this part of the president's record. The first is to say that the (non-defense and Homeland Security) spending increases were simply made to capture votes, and thus

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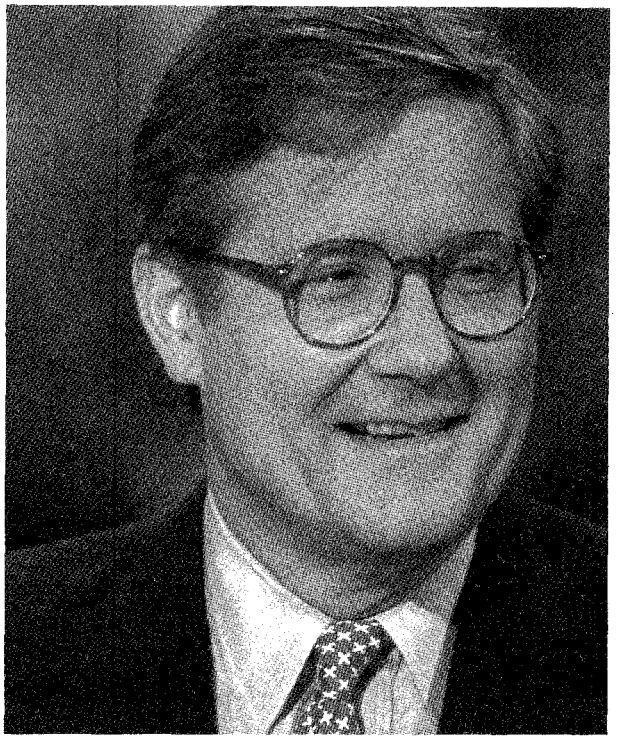

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farm subsidies and prescription drug benefits and the like are necessary to sustain Republican Congressional majorities and control the White House. The second is to say that conservatives do not care about the deficit as long as tax cuts keep coming. What we get from Barnes is this: "[Bush's] view of government is Hamiltonian: It's a valuable tool to achieve security, prosperity, and the common good. His strategy is to use government as a means to achieve conservative ends." Later in this same paragraph Barnes notes that some of these ends are not really conservative at all. But rather than admitting that perhaps Bush has political priorities like all other politicians, he lets the clear implication of his own words go unmentioned. This is a defense of Bush you don't hear even from right-leaning magazines and talk shows, who frequently attack the president for an insufficient commitment to conservative values.

At this point in the narrative, the main question before the reader is why the book is so adulatory. It would be easy to say that Barnes has simply traded away his integrity and become a partisan because the pay is better, and it allows him to write books like this, which I imagine will sell quite well. But *Rebel-in-Chief* is so sincere that one is left with the unmistakable impression that Barnes really does see Bush as a serious underdog, that the establishment is truly out to get him. Which completely undercuts Barnes's ability to appraise Bush honestly.

Thus, the second, and central, argument of the book—Bush is a rebel, some metaphoric combination of Robin Hood and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: "President Bush operates in Washington like the head of a small occupying army of insurgents, an elected band of brothers (and quite a few sisters) on a mission. He's an alien in the realm of the governing class, given a green card by voters." For Barnes to present Bush as a conservative outsider, bravely fighting an uphill battle and bucking the liberal establishment, seems especially strained as the country enters another year under Republican control of Washington.

The picture of Bush as underdog appears early and often. "As an insurgent, with few ties to Washington aside from an alliance with Republicans on Capitol Hill," Barnes begins one paragraph. This is, after all, a man who was elected with almost total support from the Republican establishment. He raised more money from big donors than any presidential candidate in history and his father was president of the United States. Still, Barnes presents him entering Washington as a sort of High Noon-like hero, alone but morally courageous. I have no evidence that Bush does not prefer Crawford, Texas, to Washington D.C., and it certainly does seem that he would rather clear brush than dine at the home of Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn. But when it comes to governing, Bush did not start with any disadvantages, and the Republican Party has been united almost completely behind him, financially and ideologically.

To some extent, of course, Barnes is right about the Washington establishment. It has been duly noted time and again that if you were to poll all the bureaucrats and reporters in this town, they would likely register as more liberal than the country at large. Additionally, they are resistant to change in a way that must certainly be frustrating for a president as bent on setting a new policy course as Bush is. But to focus solely on these things, as Barnes does, is to miss the bigger, more important, picture: The old establishment no longer holds real power. The GOP, a more conservative party than it has ever been, controls all three branches of government and has a near-stranglehold over the capital's business and lobbying communities, that in turn give it a large and persistent fundraising edge. And though the right may be able to argue that the major newspapers and television networks lean left, there is no denying that there are more openly and strongly conservative voices than liberal ones in the press.

Why then is Barnes so prone to viewing Bush as an underdog? He seems to be seeing Bush through the prism of his own experience 20 years ago, when a staunchly conservative reporter may have felt snubbed by the Washington establishment. This may explain why he is more likely than, say, the young conservatives at *National Review* to see Bush as a victim. The latter came to Washington when the right had already captured power, and that confidence enables them to (occasionally) criticize the president, or view him as a normal politician. But even among the most recent arrivals to the capital, the victim mentality perfectly captured by *Rebel-in-Chief* is still the norm. This book is just one extreme example.

Much has been written about GOP troubles in these last few months, and the conventional wisdom seems to be that the Republicans have not adjusted to being a governing party. Maybe so. It is no wonder conservatives cannot see themselves as being truly in charge when they see our two-term, 43rd president, son of the 41st, as a rebel fighting against the dark force of elite opinion. ◆



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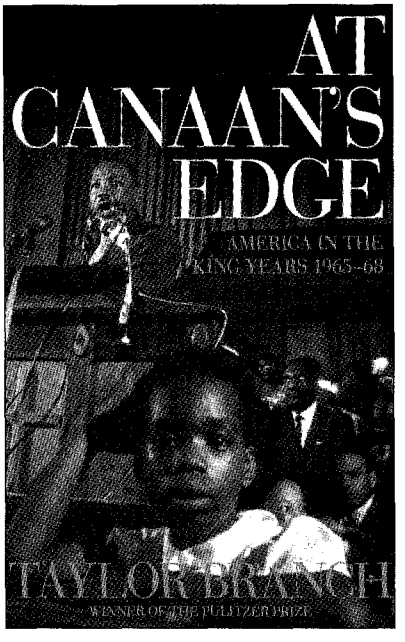
# Down From the Mountain

## Taylor Branch shows how the end of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Civil Rights movement marked the beginning of liberalism's crack-up.

**By Benjamin Wallace-Wells**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took the civil rights movement north in July 1966. He began with a rally at Chicago's Soldier Field, one that was attended by 45,000 people, boycotted by Chicago's most influential black church leader who resented the intrusion of such a famous outsider on his turf, and picketed by the American Nazi Party. It was a very hot day, and King, who had arrived at Soldier Field in a white limousine, spoke from under a dainty parasol. He protested the invidiousness of subtle, Northern forms of racism and announced that he and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would devote all of their resources to a non-violent campaign. Their new mission, he proclaimed, was to rid the city of the real-estate discrimination that prevented blacks from getting loans and rental contracts that might move them out of the ghetto, and the racial and regulatory failures that kept Chicago's slums subhuman. The speech over, Rev. King led 5,000 of his audience in a languorous line down to City Hall. It was a Sunday and the building was shuttered, so King tacked a list of his demands to the door, and




**At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968**
By Taylor Branch
Simon & Schuster, $35.00

the crowd went home. So began the confused, quixotic campaign that would consume much of the last two years of the civil-rights leader's life, an extended moment when King stopped looking like a heaven-sent prophet to many Americans and started looking like just another mixed-up liberal.

As messianic causes go, this one was a little fuzzy. Real-estate discrimination in Chicago in 1966 was a tough and floating target. It wasn't enshrined in law, but was established by thousands of individual decisions made by brokers and landlords not to rent or loan, by slumlords and city inspectors not to fix, and by political leaders not to care. King staged non-violent protests at the doors of suburban real-estate agencies and savings and loan associations, drawing large white counterprotests incited by such malicious actors as the American Nazi Party. He held meetings with gang leaders, midnight church basement disquisitions with cross-legged members of the Cobras and Roman Saints on the theology and politics of non-violence, and briefly took up residence in a slum. And King went on national television, drawing skepticism from sympathetic network anchors when he told them and the country that racism in Chicago was more pernicious than its formalized, Southern form, and that the problems that trapped blacks in poverty in the North were the nation's most compelling moral crisis.

In the end, King got outflanked by Chicago mayor Richard Daley. Just as the civil rights leader arrived to set up camp, Daley announced that the city's



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workers would raze a thousand slum buildings in six months, and pour far more money into anti-poverty programs in the city's ghettos. Daley was true to his word, and his police kept King safe from counter-protesters. But Daley also held his ground, insisting just as vehemently that he would not alienate his white constituents by taking legislative measures to pry open middle-class white neighborhoods to blacks, calling King a troublemaker, and asking him to leave.

King had been, in the South, a genius of protest theatrics, but here he had mismanaged and misunderstood things, leaving the theatrics blurred: Weren't things for blacks in the North on the whole pretty good? And who or what was King attacking, anyway? Wasn't Daley more or less a liberal, too, and wasn't he giving King more or less what he wanted? And if Chicago's blacks really wanted or needed King around, why was the city's most prominent pastor, the Daley ally Rev. J.H. Jackson, telling the Southern civil rights leader to beat it? King couldn't keep the Chicago street gangs to their promise of nonviolence, giving Daley cover to call him an outside agitator and summon the National Guard. He couldn't draw the funding for this project (particularly after Israel's success in the Six-Day War gave the wealthy New York Jews who had largely bankrolled King another attractive philanthropy) that he had for his Southern campaigns. He couldn't figure out how to manage Daley, and he couldn't get the world to care. Eventually, in 1971, SCLC closed down Operation Breadbasket, the project that the Chicago cause had morphed into, without having won a single real victory.

The failure marked the problem of King's later years, a difficulty in making nonviolent tactics work with allies less unified than the right-to-vote-seeking Southern sharecroppers and against an enemy less obviously pernicious than Bull Connor. But it also described the signal problem of liberal politicians for the next 40 years: How to generate the same moral righteousness and authority that had animated the Civil Rights movement against more subtle problems and actors—poverty, the ghetto, health care, and social mobility. The end of King's public saintedness marked the beginning of the angst of modern liberalism. Fittingly, by the time Operation Breadbasket was shut down, it was being run by a young Chicago preacher named Jesse Jackson.

The white, Southern journalist Taylor Branch (a *Washington Monthly* contributing editor) has just finished the last volume of his stunning, exhaustive three-part history of the Civil Rights movement, *America in the King Years*, which he has been working on for a quarter of a century. The series has already won him the Pulitzer Prize for history and earned him two bestsellers. This last volume, *At Canaan's Edge*, includes the Chicago episode and covers the years 1965-1968. It is the most difficult and downbeat of the three volumes because of this material; it also might be the best.

*At Canaan's Edge* is a tick-tock history of several different, interwoven stories as they evolved through these three years. The main ones are the fight of the remnants of the old, voters-rights coalition to register African-Americans in Selma, Alabama; the ever-changing conversations within the White House about how to manage the politics of the civil rights movement, which had Lyndon B. Johnson supporting and winning votes for landmark voting rights and anti-poverty bills, before growing angry with King's perceived disloyalty and backing away from him; and the back-and-forth in the rump Civil Rights establishment around King about what its next move should be, its awkward and failed attempts to articulate a compelling moral case either for a massive initiative against black poverty and discrimination in the North or, later, against the Vietnam War.

Branch's book is strictly chronological, and so he dips into each of these stories for a couple of pages, then into another, so that he often covers what was happening in all three during the course of a signal day. It sounds jagged, and occasionally the book reads like one of those VH1 documentaries on the sixties, ping-ponging between a Vietnam protester setting himself on fire outside the White House, Stokely Carmichael's car chase with the Mississippi Klan, and what Lady Bird ate for breakfast that morning. But mostly, Branch's style lends the book the overwhelming authority of explained motivation. When Johnson chastens George Wallace, or a King speech is more critical of America's Vietnam policy than anyone expected, the reader understands why; he's been with these characters for a couple of years, hearing nearly everything they hear, and watching their subtle, often internal political twists and turns.

The characters, after all, are the thing. There's an eternal battle between academics and journalists in the writing of history, with the scholars emphasizing long arcs of historic force and the hacks stressing the agency of particular figures—a take that has the advantage of making more interesting copy; by my count, Branch's journalistic history contains at least four stand-ins for Hamlet. One of Branch's greatest accomplishments and contributions has been to master the complicated characters of the Civil Rights movement, not just King, Johnson, and Carmichael, but lesser figures, too, the liberal New York lawyer Stanley Levison, the FBI man Deke Deloach.

Here is Branch, for instance, summing up the difference between the two presidents King had to deal with: "Whereas Kennedy had charmed King while keeping him at a safe distance, harping in private on the political dangers of alleged subversives in the civil rights movement, Johnson in the White House was intensely personal but unpredictable—treating King variously to a Texas bear hug of shared dreams or a towering, wounded snit." These are the kinds of distinctions on which history, in delicate moments, can turn.

Branch's great character is King. One of the questions that still lingers around King, in African-American Studies departments and the more wistful districts of the letters page of *The Nation*, is whether the history of race relations in the country might have turned out differently if King had survived. Would the radical takeover of the race move-



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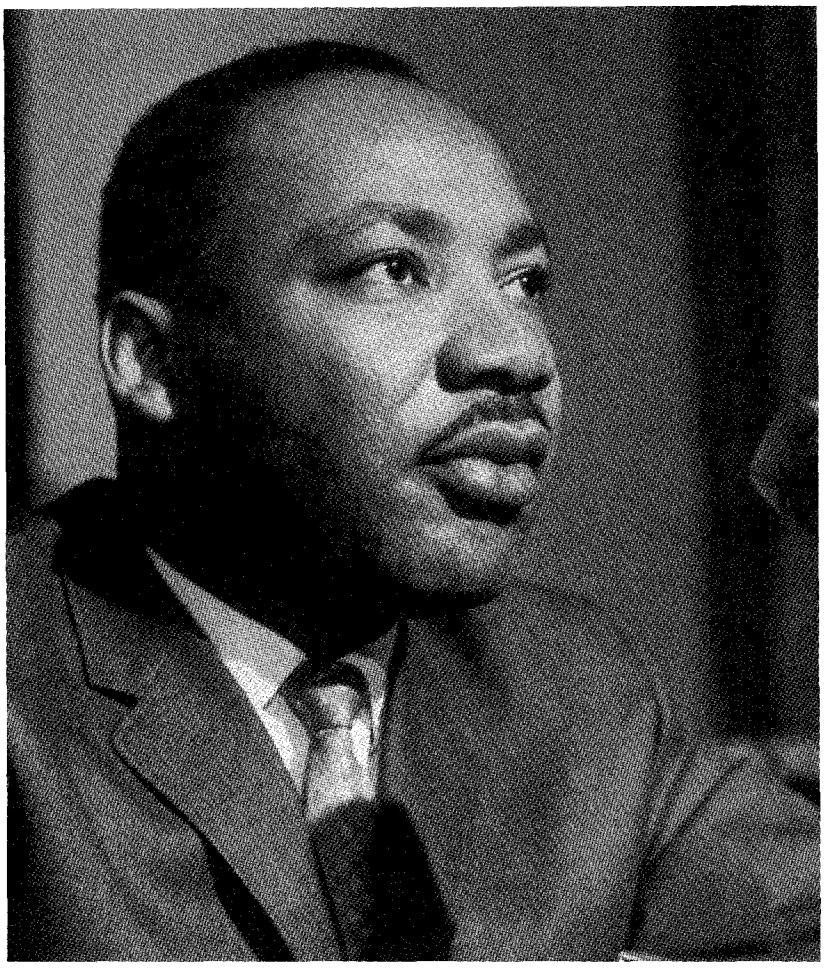
ment have been forestalled, the left's moral momentum preserved? Branch doesn't take on the question directly, but it's hard to read his comprehensive history and not come to the conclusion that King's survival probably wouldn't have greatly changed the course of the country's racial and political history.

The chronicle Branch gives of the last two years of King's life is one of a succession of thrashing failures. King couldn't gin up any popular momentum for the Northern anti-poverty crusade. His tiptoeing, then thundering entry into international relations—in his condemnation of the Vietnam War and support for Israel in the Six-Day War—made him look naïve and foolish. His championing of the trash collectors' strike in Memphis made him look like just another liberal, and a loser, too. And his attempts to manage the emerging radical core of Huey Newton and H. Rap Brown just made him look out-of-touch and ineffective, a kindly but irrelevant grandpa.

None of this, in Branch's elegant telling, impeaches the nobility of King's basic imagination, or his undertaking. But it does suggest that there is something tenuous and circumstantial about revolutions. King was just as right when he preached against the problems of the black slum or the repressive working conditions visited upon trash collectors as he was when he summoned a great moral awakening to confront the white Southern forces that kept blacks from voting. But the conflict between evil and good was not nearly so evident. Reading about King's frustrated efforts, you can see where it's headed. In hindsight, we anticipate the liberal politics that will mobilize behind the failed assumption that the country will invest in the condition of women or workers or the environment with the same moral vigor that led to the successes of King's civil rights movements.

Then, of course, there were the white people. Branch very deftly documents the ways in which the careers of an entire generation of conservative politicians depended upon managing the rhetoric of racial backlash. Here, for example, is Ronald Reagan's voice playing over an ominous film of riots in a commercial for his 1966 gubernatorial campaign: "Every day the jungle draws a little closer.... Our city streets are jungle paths after dark." And Branch notes that the man who would become Reagan's presidential successor, then-Houston congressman George H.W. Bush, gave a 1968 speech criticizing "miscellaneous purchases under the federal anti-poverty program" in which he charged that seven new microscopes the government had bought for schools in his Houston district were in fact "rifle scopes secretly retooled for insurrection." But if there's a failure in Branch's book, it's that he dwells too briefly upon this theme. For all his great characters, Branch decides not to create even one iconic figure of what would become the great white backlash—the defining feature of politics for the next quarter-century.



Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968

Even so, Branch nails most of the big stuff—perhaps most important of all, he understands the way historic certainty gusted through the capital in the mid-1960s, and then shifted direction. Here is Lyndon Johnson, in 1965, trying to convince George Wallace to stop attacking federal efforts to register black voters in Alabama: "'What do you want left when you die?' Johnson intoned. 'Do you want a great big marble monument that reads, 'George Wallace—He Built,' or do you want a little piece of scrawny pine board that reads, 'George Wallace—He Hated?'" Johnson was no natural progressive, but, for a fleeting moment he and most members of Congress felt strongly that history was moving left, and all pols who wanted to keep their seats had better get on board. In Branch's expert hands, the next three years of American history are the diffusion of that certainty and the political momentum it would bring—and that progressives have spent the last 40 years trying in vain to recapture.

**Benjamin Wallace-Wells** is an editor of *The Washington Monthly.*

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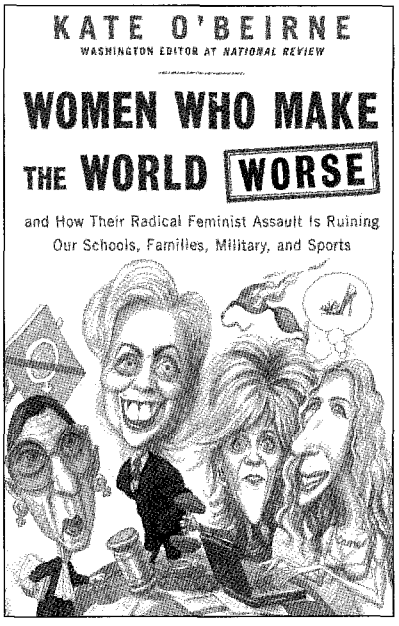
# Femi-nazi Hunter

## Kate O'Beirne targets the excesses of the women's movement—30 years too late.

**By Jamie Malanowski**

You know you're in for a long, hard day of book reviewing when you open Kate O'Beirne's *Women Who Make the World Worse* and find an introduction that begins—(make yourself comfortable, we're going to quote at length here)—"On March 11, 2005, Brian Nichols overpowered Deputy Sheriff Cynthia Hall in the Atlanta courthouse where she worked, and killed four people before surrendering the following day. We weren't supposed to notice the insanity of a petite fifty-one year-old grandmother guarding a former college football linebacker who had been caught with two sharpened door hinges in his socks earlier in the week. The local sheriff's office had adopted the politically correct premise that men and women are interchangeable and only misogynist males would deny a willing woman any job she sought. The four deaths in Atlanta are just a recent concrete example of what feminism has wrought."

Yes, that's right—blame feminism. We're not going to ascribe this one to the lack of Jesus in Brian's life, or the lack of values in the public school system, or to the tax-and-spend liberals who are a minority in Congress, or to soft-headed judges who believe in holding accused criminals for trial instead of summarily executing them. No, pour all this blood onto Betty Friedan's hands.




**Women Who Make the World Worse**
By Kate O'Beirne
Sentinel, $24.95

But in order to do that, of course, we're going to have to ignore the fact that Brian Nichols was not handcuffed, a condition which, whether resulting from Deputy Sheriff Hall's brain freeze or someone else's, would seem to have more to do with a lack of common sense than her proprietorship of ovaries. Let alone her size. Ms. Hall may have been much smaller than her attacker, but given that the average height of the American male is 5'9", so would most men; as nearly anybody who's watched football can tell you, to block a linebacker, you're going to need a tight end or a guard. Moreover, we're also going to have to ignore the fact that the person who eventually calmed Brian Nichols and led to his peaceful surrender just happened to be a woman, the slightly built methamphetamine user Ashley Smith.

So maybe it wasn't being a woman that sits at the heart of Ms. Hall's failure; maybe it's that she didn't snort enough crank.

Whatever. Such subtleties are lost on author O'Beirne, who is the Washington editor of *National Review* and who for years could be counted on to appear on "Capital Gang" and denounce all things liberal in the archly miffed tone typically employed by mothers at PTA meetings who aren't happy that Elaine and Jackie are always in charge of Pizza Day. The whole book is filled with examples of O'Beirne extrapolating generalities from specifics and explaining specifics with generalities and generally leaving nuance, context, and inconvenient facts out in the street.

O'Beirne's beef is with "radical feminists" who "are ruining our schools, families, military and sports." What this translates into is "I have book envy, and I need a target that I can easily drop-kick all over conservative radio." With the Bush administration having made such a hash of things ("Uh, let's see—can't pick on big spending liberals. Can't pick on liberal interventionists. Can't pick on anti-war liberals. Can't pick on the corrupt Democratic Congress. That pretty much leaves gays and feminists."), O'Beirne has had to turn the dial of the Wayback Machine all the way to the mid-1970s, when such a species as a radical feminist did actually walk on her unshaven legs across this land. And while there are surely a few radical feminists still in existence, none has anywhere near the political or cultural influence that her ancestors once did, and none has a smidgen of the pernicious power to ruin our schools, families, military, and coun-



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try that radical Christian fundamentalists and radical tax-cutters currently possess.

Of course, the reason that there are so few radical feminists around nowadays is that the movement they created has been so enormously successful. There may not be so many radical feminists, but by the standards of *The Feminine Mystique*'s era, almost everybody is now a mainstream feminist. Women are everywhere they want to be, though perhaps not in the proportion that they desire, but that time will come. Women's rights are so fundamental that George W. Bush included the liberation of women from the Taliban among his reasons for going to war in Afghanistan. Women's rights are so fundamental that no one who aspires to be considered a serious person would suggest that a woman couldn't possibly be a president or run a corporation or golf in a PGA tournament. Indeed, women's rights are so fundamental that someone like O'Beirne can forget that she grew up in a world where the person who'd spout the kind of mush and twaddle she produces on TV would almost certainly have been a man.

Unwilling to take on the sea change, O'Beirne attacks the excesses at the margins. This is ridiculously easy work, not because Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan are ridiculous people, but because in the course of overthrowing an entrenched power structure, some crazy ideas will be embraced and some rhetorical excess will be committed. The funniest howler O'Beirne catches here comes from Gloria Steinem, who, in trying to justify hiring female firefighters who would be more likely to be weaker than male firefighters and less able to throw on their backs and carry to safety, say, a big fat guy like me, apparently said, "It's better to drag them out, because there's less smoke down there [on the floor]. I mean, we're probably killing people by carrying them out at that height." Nice try.

But if Gloria Steinem didn't always know what she was talking about, O'Beirne is hardly one to take her to school. Her discussion of Title IX lacks all nuance. Yes, it's true that some men's programs are being dropped, and that's sad, and it's also true that along with being a piece of legislation that led to a flowering of athletic opportunities for young women, Title IX is a bit of a blunt instrument for helping to decide what to cut and what to fund when dollars are scarce. But the biggest problem in creating equal opportunities lies at schools that have big-time football programs, meaning that a disproportionate amount of the scholarships and other funds that go to men are locked into one sport, creating shortfalls when divers and wrestlers hold out their palms. O'Beirne doesn't even discuss football.

There are points in her discussion when O'Beirne reveals that what bothers her is not radical feminism but mainstream equality. She is really bugged by the idea of women participating in the military to any degree beyond Army nurse. She describes in detail the attack in which Pvt. Jessica Lynch was captured and finds the wounds she suffered and the depredations that were committed upon her appalling. Well, hell yeah, of course they were. Whom shall we blame for that? George W. Bush? Saddam Hussein? Donald Rumsfeld? The adult person who volunteers for the Army without considering that she might be exposed to combat? O'Beirne chooses to blame those who believe that in an open society, withholding opportunity, however perilous, from qualified people who seek that opportunity is unacceptable. "A woman being brutally killed alongside men is a long-awaited feminist dream of equality," writes O'Beirne, in a staggeringly ugly bit of rhetoric that approaches blood libel.

(Of course, ugly rhetoric seems to be O'Beirne's specialty. "There were no feminist protests when there wasn't a pleasing gender balance among the 343 brave firemen who died on 9/11," she writes. Well, no, there were no protests, and I doubt anyone thought of protests except O'Beirne, who in this line exposes herself as possessing the sort of supremely cynical mind that can look upon a national tragedy and figure out how to twist it into narrow political argument. It's true no women were among the FDNY's fallen, but what does O'Beirne say to Captain Kathy Mazza, a Port Authority police officer who on 9/11 left the safety of her office in Jersey City and went to the towers, who helped people evacuate and who, witnesses say, shot out windows to create new escape routes, and who died with a group of firemen when the south tower collapsed? Does O'Beirne say to this hero "you are but a radical feminist's dream"?)

O'Beirne cites the work of a lot of social scientists in discussing her points. These social scientists seem to fall into two groups: those who support O'Beirne's theses, whom she admires, and radical feminist social scientists, whose work O'Beirne finds dangerous. O'Beirne quotes—selectively—from a lot of feminist researchers, making them seem ridiculous. And she's isn't always wrong. But the average reader might feel like he is witnessing a savage battle that is being waged way on the periphery of ordinary people's lives. Most people, if they're acquainted with this research at all, use it as an echo chamber that emphasizes their own fears, anxieties, and goals. Either way, these findings, many of which are interesting, are basically irrelevant. As even the former school board of Dover, Pa., can tell you, we don't run our society based on scientific findings. We run it according to a belief system or an ideology or a theory that puts equality and freedom at the center of the human experience. Our glory is when we take that theory seriously, and our shame is when we don't. It's not always easy to live up to our ideals and we often make mistakes in trying to figure out the best way to achieve what we think is good. In this book, O'Beirne may offer some food for thought and may identify some zealous excess, but basically she's just heckling people who have written a proud page in our history.

**Jamie Malanowski** is the managing editor of *Playboy*.



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# The Gospel of William Jennings Bryan

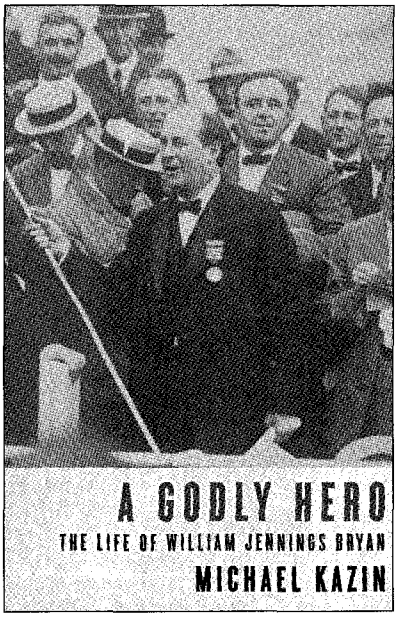
## The Great Commoner wasn't a progressive despite his traditionalism —but because of it.

**By Ed Kilgore**

Upon hearing of the death of William Jennings Bryan in 1925, the Socialist leader Eugene Debs sadly commented that the iconic populist over the course of his lifetime "grew more and more conservative until finally he stood before the country as a champion of everything reactionary in our political and social life."

This is the still-prevailing judgment that led Georgetown University's Michael Kazin to undertake a new biography of Bryan. Kazin's mission in *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* is to establish that the Great Commoner was the same man with the same principles, and much the same following, during and between the two famous bookends of his career: the 1896 "Cross of Gold" speech that launched his tumultuous first presidential campaign, and the Scopes "Monkey Trial" a few days before his death. Throughout Bryan's career, Kazin shows, he embodied a "creed that married democracy and pietism in a romantic gospel that borrowed equally from Jefferson and Jesus"—a creed that today's self-styled populists of the left and the right largely reject.

In seeking to rediscover Bryan as the paragon of a highly integrated worldview, and not a paradox combining "progressive" and "reactionary" impulses, Kazin devotes a significant portion of his book to "Bryan's people,"




**A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan**
By Michael Kazin
Knopf, $30.00

the vast array of largely middle-class and typically Protestant folk who looked to him for political and moral direction over three decades. Like Bryan himself, his devoted followers (upon whose correspondence with Will and Mary Bryan Kazin draws heavily) were characterized by a highly moralistic and Bible-inflected approach to politics and a very direct and practical approach to the implications of their faith. The trusts, the railroad owners, the Wall Street speculators, and the urban bosses who populated Bryan's demonology were deplored as the idolatrous oppressors of godly people, not simply as products of a flawed economic system.

Though he rarely uses the term, Kazin's focus is on Bryanism as much as Bryan, and he is at pains to make the better known stages in Bryan's career—the three presidential campaigns, his later role as Democratic kingmaker, his sad tenure as a quasi-pacifist secretary of state, and his final stand against evolution in Dayton, Tenn.—punctuation marks rather than turning points in his hero's life.

This non-episodic method helps the author paint a clear portrait of his subject, often in the mirror of his followers' adoring eyes. If you want a detailed exposition of Bryan's electoral strategy in 1908, an examination of the economics of bimetallism, or a tick-tock account of his struggle against America's entry into World War I, this is not the book for you. But if you want to understand the man and the movement that dominated the Democratic Party during an exceedingly complex period of U.S. history, Kazin is an indispensable guide.

And far from being any kind of paradox, Bryan himself comes across in this book as an exceedingly simple man, rarely afflicted with doubt, happy in his domestic life (despite his constant absences and his wife's increasingly crippling arthritis), sanguine about his changing political fortunes, and confident in the righteousness of his and his "people's" various causes. That's not to say Bryan was uncalculating; he was, in fact, the master of the perfectly timed political maneuver, perhaps best illustrated by his personal domination of at least four national political conventions (including 1912, when he personally won the nomination for Woodrow Wilson with a crucial shift of support), and his leading role in another.

This book does a masterful job of examining Bryan as an orator (not only the key to his political career, but also his primary source of income from 1896 on), and Kazin makes it clear Bryan's leadership of his movement was sustained by his constant speaking tours, especially in conjunction with



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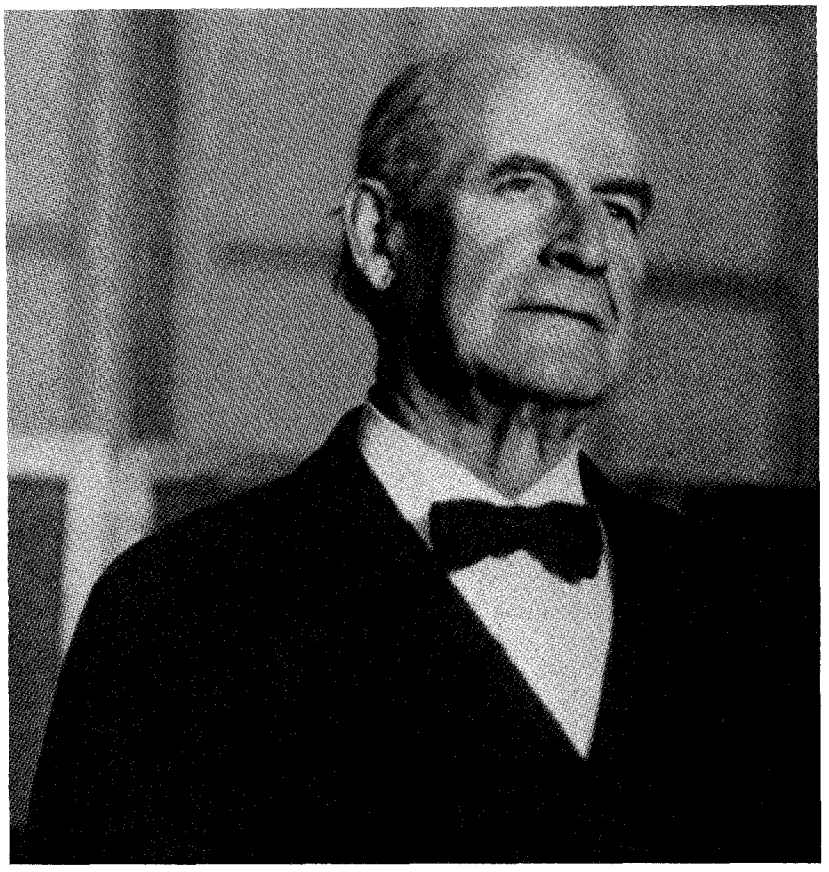

that great phenomenon of the pre-radio 20th century, the Chautauqua circuit. "Beginning in 1904, he spent the better part of twenty summers as the star attraction on the weeklong programs that edified, titillated and amused millions of Americans who seldom had access to a big-city theater or lecture hall," writes Kazin. He nicely evokes Bryan's powerful and mellifluous voice and notes poignantly that the first national convention where Bryan's rhetorical pyrotechnics failed, in 1920, was also the first convention employing that great equalizer, electronic amplification.

Just as he was the first presidential candidate to personally barnstorm the country, Bryan was also probably the first major politician to develop "stock" stump speeches—indeed, an assortment of them on a wide variety of subjects—that he polished and adapted for years. Kazin provides numerous examples of his subject's ability and willingness to effortlessly combine political and religious metaphors and arguments, at a time when God's Word was the *lingua franca* of far-flung Protestant America. It was easy for Bryan to adopt the voice of a prophet, since that was the voice he and his audience best understood.

While Kazin, as the title of the book suggests, clearly admires Bryan, he does draw attention again and again to the Commoner's "one great flaw"—his complete blindness to the evils of Jim Crow, despite, or perhaps because of, his intimate knowledge of the South, where he lived during his later years, and where he always found his most intense and consistent support.

Kazin's steady focus on the consistency of Bryan and his people enables him to explain the different causes Bryan championed as modalities of a single system reflecting changing circumstances. Bimetallism faded with the vast expansion of gold supplies and the agricultural boom just after the turn of the century. Anti-imperialism emerged as Bryan's main focus during the debate over what to do with the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, and again in the run-up to U.S. involvement in World War I.

In the one major flip-flop of Bryan's career, he embraced the drive for prohibition—already supported by much of his flock—after his third presidential race, and it became for him not only an integral cause, but central to his, and much of the country's, definition of "progressivism." At about the same time, he became a staunch advocate of women's suffrage, a movement that shared much of the political base of prohibitionism, and which Bryan argued would raise the moral tone of political life generally.

And in his last great crusade, of course, Bryan became the nation's best-known opponent of the teaching of natural selection in public schools. As Kazin shows, this was no "move to the right" on his part; it was motivated not just by Bryan's lifelong devotion to biblical teachings, but by his conviction that what we now call "social Darwinism," and the "scientific" racism and eugenic manipulation that would later ravage Europe, lay in Darwin's shadow.

Aside from these changing priorities, there were many constants in Bryan's agenda: a steadily growing interest in political reforms like primaries and ballot initiatives; an abiding commitment to the creation of a progressive income tax; trust-busting; public control of currency (culminating in Wilson's Federal Reserve Act); public regulation, and in some cases ownership, of utilities and railroads; labor union rights; and, most consistently of all, free trade. This last cause should be duly noted by today's neopopulists of the left, who often regard free trade as the ultimate corporate conspiracy.

Suffusing Bryanism from beginning to end was a fierce hostility to urban culture, perhaps, as Kazin suggests, dating back to an unhappy early experience while studying law in Chicago. While Kazin shows convincingly that Bryan was entirely innocent of the religious prejudice and xenophobia of many of his followers, there is no question that he identified every political, social, economic, and moral evil with the culture of the big cities of the East. It's only a small exaggeration to say that Bryan hated Wall Street because it was in New York as much as he hated New York because it harbored Wall Street. Profiteers, poverty, saloons, political machines and bosses, sexual

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immorality, and impiety—in Bryan's rhetoric, and certainly in his mind, these urban sins were all of one piece, and all an obstacle to the Jeffersonian republic of virtue and mutual assistance he envisioned.

Placing Bryan and Bryanism in the proper historical context is difficult, and one of the few judgments on which Kazin is not completely compelling is his argument that Herbert Hoover had it right when he snarled that the New Deal was "Bryanism under new words and methods." Yes, Bryan led the revolt against the Bourbon Democracy of Grover Cleveland that no less an authority than Ayn Rand once called the most libertarian in American history. But the culmination of his economic and political thinking was less the modified social-democratic model of the New Deal than the refined Jeffersonian ideology of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom.

More relevant today is what Kazin's version of Bryan, and the Bryanite brand of populism, means for neopopulists of various stripes.

The lesson for right-wing populists, especially those of the Christian right, is pretty clear: Once upon a time, right here in America, tens of millions of people read the Bible daily and read little else; believed it to be the literal and inerrant Word of God; and somehow interpreted it as a saga wherein God repeatedly delivered His people from the predations of the rich and the powerful and the privileged, perpetually condemned their subjugation as a divine commandment, and further commanded that they respect their equality as His children. In other words, those politicized Christians who have formed a firm alliance with Mammon and Mars on the grounds that the Word's main message today is to condemn abortion and homosexuality and feminism are forever vulnerable to those faithful who read their Bible and see otherwise.

As a Democrat, I am naturally more interested in the lessons for the neopopulists of the left, who are enjoying something of a renaissance these days by offering a theory of how Bryan's old party can break out of its bicoastal, blue state ghetto.

Kazin, himself a man of the left, would presumably agree that one does not follow Bryan's example by tearing his economic policies out of their broader cultural context or fomenting class consciousness or hatred of corporations as a matter of pocketbook self-interest rather than communal values. Indeed, the common neopopulist prescription of using economic "populism" to trump cultural "populism" sets one aspect of Bryanism—and the weaker aspect at that—against the other. Telling working people who care about cultural issues that they are expressing displaced anger over their legitimate economic grievances is condescending at best and insulting at worst and is entirely alien to Bryan's kind of populism. Moreover, it's an odd kind of populism that cannot accept "the people" as they actually are: complicated creatures with a mix of "correct" and "incorrect" views, which cannot always, or even often, be reduced to one of Dr. George Lakoff's "frames."

There's one more contemporary issue for the left which the book implicitly raises: the occasional necessity but perennial peril of bitter intra-party conflict.

Without question, Bryan's revolt in 1896 overthrew a Democratic establishment mired in the politics of earlier decades, focused obsessively on competing for the "swing state" of New York, and indifferent to the growing challenges of the industrial age. His candidacy also co-opted and thus largely neutered the appeal of the People's Party, which had been mortally threatening Democratic hegemony in the South.

But Bryan's savage indictment of the Bourbon Democrats (which the fair-minded Kazin considers somewhat overwrought) also disabled Democrats in the East and much of the Midwest and dislocated a partisan balance that had produced five straight photo-finish presidential elections. And with the sole exception of Wilson's reelection in 1916, Democrats would not come close to a majority of the popular vote in any of the six presidential elections between then and Bryan's death and would remain especially weak in the urban areas Bryan and his people spurned as Babylon.

Though Bryan's relations with other elements of the party varied from tepid to cold, the very convictions that made him the leader of a movement tended to make that movement inflexible and sometimes self-destructive. By 1924, the Commoner's last convention, his determination to reject any candidate who was not "progressive and dry" helped produce the infamous 103-ballot deadlock. Worse yet, Bryan's culturally based and anti-urban definition of "progressivism" led him into alliances that betrayed his best instincts. It's no accident that his last major convention speech was in opposition to a platform plank condemning the Ku Klux Klan, which he considered more "progressive" than urban "wet" reformers like Al Smith. And it's no accident that this convention produced among the worst-performing Democratic presidential ticket in history, with Bryan's brother Charlie in the second spot.

"Progressivism" was never the same after 1924, and that was a good thing, as Bryan's people finally expired as a self-conscious faction and entered the mainstream that ultimately swelled into the New Deal coalition.

I hope neopopulists and those representing today's Democratic factions read Kazin's fine book and learn a host of lessons: "The people" are who they are; "populism" cannot be forced left or right; and "progressivism" is the shared legacy and aspiration of us all, not the exclusive property of those most passionate about exclusively claiming it.

As for Bryan, the epitaph he probably desired is reflected in a song written by bluegrass musician Charlie Oakes, which Kazin quotes in the last chapter:

*He fought the evolutionists, and infidels and fools*

*Who were trying to ruin the minds of children in the schools*

*Three times he ran for president, but capitalists wouldn't let him win*

*Because he was a friend to the poor and to the working man.*

**Ed Kilgore** is vice president for policy at the Democratic Leadership Council.



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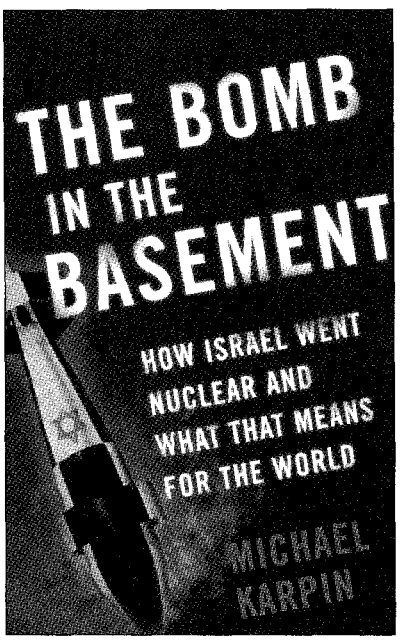
# Bombs Away

## How Israel got nukes—and set off today's Middle Eastern arms race.

**By Jacob Heilbrunn**

When Israel successfully developed a nuclear bomb in the 1960s, it inadvertently became a kind of role model for a motley crew of regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. Being first off the block had big advantages for Israel, especially during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when the threat of a bomb may have helped keep its enemies at bay. But whether it's India, Pakistan, or the most recent nuclear aspirants, Iran and North Korea, the same scenario seems to play, or be playing, itself out with distressing regularity. A regime denies that it's developing nuclear weapons, foils outside observation, and then, *voila*, manages to enter the nuclear club. It's not hard to see why this would be so. A good deal of hypocrisy surrounds the official five nuclear powers—Britain, France, the United States, China, and Russia—under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which have sought to keep a monopoly on the product. Take the United States. The Bush administration has sought to lower the threshold for using tactical nuclear bombs while at the same time trying to deny them to pretty much everyone else. Obtaining a bomb has thus become a satisfying way of thumbing one's nose at the imperialistic Yankees and sending them into a frenzy.

Michael Karpin's *The Bomb in the Basement*, therefore, arrives at a timely moment. Karpin, a prominent Israeli television and radio news reporter who has written several books, including one on the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, has ventured into what remains largely forbidden territory in his own country. Mordechai Vanunu, a technician at Israel's once-secret Dimona nuclear weapons factory, was kidnapped in Italy in 1986 by Mossad (Israel's vaunted intelligence service) and ended up serving 18 years in jail for divulging nuclear secrets to the British *Sunday Times*. Based on a documentary he produced several years ago, Karpin's history relies heavily on interviews with many of the scientists and politicians, including Shimon Peres, who were vital in creating an Israeli nuclear weapon. Karpin may not be the first to write about this topic, which was covered by Avner Cohen's scholarly *Israel and the Bomb* (1998), but he provides the most comprehensive and illuminating account of Israel's path and its policy of "strategic ambiguity" about nuclear weapons. Perhaps it is a sign of Israel's maturity as a state that it can now permit books like Karpin's to appear—though it appears censored. Or perhaps it is merely a useful way of reminding Israel's foes, (like Iran) about the apparent dimensions of its arsenal, which is said to include several hundred nuclear missiles, not to mention nuclear-armed submarines.




**The Bomb in the Basement: How Israel Went Nuclear and What That Means for the World**
By Michael Karpin
Simon & Schuster, $26.00

As Karpin correctly stresses, Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was the key to developing a bomb. On Dec. 21, 1960, he told the Israeli parliament in an emotional speech that Dimona existed and was "meant to be used only for peaceful purposes." The Holocaust loomed large in Israel's consciousness, and Ben-Gurion was convinced that possession of a bomb was central to avoiding a repetition of the slaughter of Jews. Ben-Gurion assembled a crack scientific team led by a brilliantly inventive German émigré named Ernst Bergmann who ran roughshod over bureaucratic obstacles. Karpin focuses on the tensions that threatened to derail the project before it had even gotten started. Some of Karpin's most interesting passages focus on the army's reluctance to develop a bomb, which it viewed as a costly and futile sideshow. The army leadership believed that Israel would be better off focusing on amassing more mundane weaponry. Ben-Gurion disagreed. He created a black budget for the bomb that would have sent his generals into conniptions had they only known about it. "Israel's nuclear project was run," says Karpin, "like a state within a state."

Karpin is also very good on the reciprocal advantages that Israel and France derived from cooperating with each other. Karpin rightly notes that Israel would never have been able to build a bomb without the assistance of the French. Shimon Peres, the young



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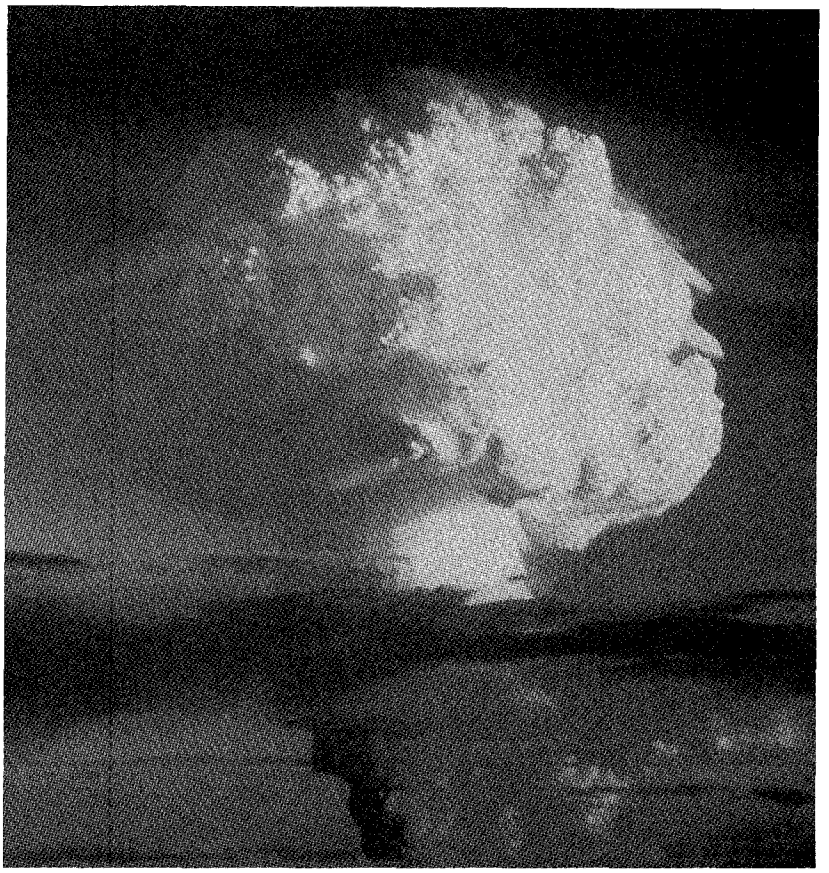

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head of the defense ministry who always fancied himself an intellectual savant, got on well with his French counterparts. For their part, the French were eager to have access to the Israeli scientific establishment in order to speed the process of constructing their own bomb. What's more, the French coveted intelligence on Algeria, where they were waging a bitter and ultimately disastrous war against Islamic militants. What Israel—or, more precisely, Ben-Gurion—wanted from the French was a nuclear reactor. In return for Israeli help in the 1956 Suez War, France agreed to cough one up. This was heady stuff for Israel, which was for the first time playing in the big leagues of great-power politics. On Oct. 29, 1956, Israel launched an assault on Egypt that triggered the Suez War. "By agreeing that Israel would take part in the Suez campaign," writes Karpin, "Ben-Gurion was taking a grave risk in view of the inevitably angry response of the Soviet Union and the likely displeasure of the United States." No matter. Ben-Gurion was prepared to pretty much sacrifice anything in order to get hold of a nuclear bomb. Once Norway agreed in 1959 to sell heavy water to Israel, the course was clear.

The surprising, or perhaps not so surprising, thing is that it took the United States until 1960 to begin to comprehend that Israel really was building a bomb. The CIA report on the failure to identify the Dimona project earlier has a familiar ring. It said: "The general feeling that Israel could not achieve this capability without outside aid from the U.S. or its allies... led to the tendency to discount rumors of Israeli reactor construction and French collaboration in the nuclear weapons area." Interestingly, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser was fooled by the Israelis. He thought Israel was simply disseminating propaganda to make itself seem more powerful than it actually was. It's important to remember that, in the 1960s, the notion of a small state like Israel constructing a bomb did seem improbable.

Shortly after becoming president, John F. Kennedy successfully pressured Ben-Gurion into allowing a team of Americans to inspect Dimona, but they saw what they wanted to see, being unable to find any evidence that it was other than a peaceful project. Richard M. Nixon cut a deal with Golda Meir in which Israel agreed to forego the idea of public testing in exchange for American acquiescence and an end to inspections. Anyway, the United States wasn't that interested in harassing Israel publicly. Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol came up with the Delphic formulation "Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East" to satisfy the Americans. It didn't take much. Once the Middle East became the cockpit of superpower tensions, the United States became Israel's staunch backer and had little interest in subjecting it to international inspections.

Karpin doesn't speculate about it, but the Israeli example must have emboldened other powers to go down the same path. Status quo powers like Saudi Arabia don't need an atomic bomb—at least not until the Iranians procure one. Karpin suggests that Israel might take out—as it did in 1983 Saddam Hussein's nascent project—Iran's effort at constructing a bomb. But exactly how this would occur, he does not say. An attack that failed to take out the Iranian reactor would be worse than not attacking. And thanks to the Bush administration's maladroit handling of the run-up to the Iraq war, not to mention the aftermath, it was harder than ever to assemble an international coalition that might be able to exert any pressure on Tehran.

Karpin is undaunted. He ends with an effusion about how a nuclear-free Middle East might look. But this is pious nonsense. His book offers scant room for optimism. Israel conducted its search for a nuclear bomb with restraint and diplomatic dexterity. The bluff and bombast emanating from the lunatics in Tehran could not be further removed from Israel's emphasis on nuclear weapons as a last resort. Israel has always understood something that Iran does not: how to keep a secret secret.

**Jacob Heilbrunn** is a Washington writer.



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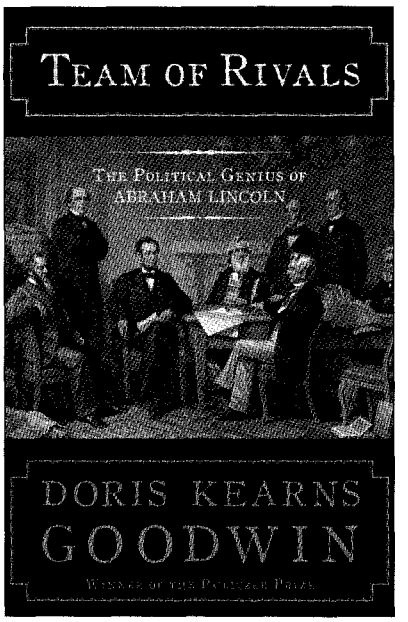
# He Felt Thy Pain

## Empathy was Lincoln's secret political weapon.

**By William Lee Miller**

We Americans somehow manage to make a maximum hero out of Abraham Lincoln, a politician if there ever was one, at the same time we hold a heavy negative stereotype of "politicians" and "politics." In the immense popular legend that Lincoln has become, and in the endless outpouring of books, his life story and his personality often seem to upstage and obscure the "political" accomplishment that made his life story worth telling and his personality worth examining. We tend to lose the political forest for the biographical log cabins.

Doris Kearns Goodwin, the accomplished biographer of 20th-century presidents, has found a way to put the political "genius"—to use her term—back at the center of the story of this great 19th-century president. In her extraordinary new book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, she does this by embedding Lincoln in a nest of other politicians. She not only tells Lincoln's story, but also interweaves it with the story of the three other top candidates for the Republican nomination in 1860, whom Lincoln, in a striking act of self-confidence and magnanimity, took into his cabinet. They are, first, William Seward, who had been expected to win the Republican nomination and who went on to become secretary of state and Lincoln's closest adviser and friend (Goodwin, whose research and book notes are formidable, makes good use of the thousands of letters exchanged between Seward and his abolitionist wife Frances home in Auburn); second, the righteous, able, but egocentric abolitionist Salmon Chase who, although itching to be president, served well as Lincoln's secretary of the treasury (Goodwin also makes good use of the letters between Chase and his lovely and devoted daughter Kate, who became an ambitious Washington hostess and rival to Mary Lincoln); and finally, the least known of the four, the uxorious Edward Bates, the Missouri conservative who became Lincoln's attorney general and furnishes this story with some domestic bliss and a "charming diary."




**Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln**
By Doris Kearns Goodwin
Simon & Schuster, $35.00

The popular image of the legendary figure Abraham Lincoln is afflicted with an ahistorical and unpolitical perfectionism, both among those who celebrate him and those who, in disillusioned rebound from the myth, debunk him. The task of a serious writer addressing a general audience is to cut through this and show a real human being making decisions within the limits of a particular time and place and in a distinct role. Goodwin's device proves to be a particularly effective way of doing that, not by general historical description but by parallel biography. These "rivals" provide benchmarks by which Lincoln's responses to events may be measured.

Goodwin gives a particularly strong account of the contest for the Republican nomination in 1860. Lincoln did not win solely by luck, he won also by political shrewdness and by careful cultivation of a reputation as the ablest spokesman for the center of the Republican Party. Meanwhile the other three were each making characteristic costly errors: Seward overconfident, Chase self-deceiving, Bates unsure of his touch. Before Lincoln was perceived to be a candidate for the nomination, he skillfully concealed his cautious, growing hopes; deflected explicit support while speaking with "well-modulated enthusiasm" about other candidates; encouraged his representative to press the selection of Chicago as the site for the convention (since his name was not yet prominently mentioned, that city could be presented as a neutral site); and quietly encouraged delegates to regard him as their second choice should their first falter.

And he accepted an invitation to speak to the "Mental Culture" of New York at Cooper's Union. Political "genius" includes not only skillful maneuvering in the world of power,



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but also effective performance in the world of ideas. Lincoln gave an essential boost to his candidacy by giving an incomparable expression to the core positions of the new Republican Party.

Once the story moves onto the Lincoln administration, Goodwin brings in the other members of the cabinet—especially the able, irascible Edwin Stanton—and the book becomes what we have not had for more than a half century: a good book about Lincoln and his cabinet. Lincoln's shrewd management of this disparate cabinet was also part of the larger politics because the members—especially Seward and Chase—were potent symbols to the public of broadly differing political positions. All Lincoln biographies give an account of the episode in December of 1862 when congressional radicals (privately encouraged by Seward's personal and ideological rival, Chase) tried to get Seward, the leading symbol of conservative views, dismissed from the cabinet. Yet, Lincoln deftly orchestrated a series of meetings to expose Chase's duplicity and extract from him a resignation letter parallel to that from Seward—so that he could then reject both letters at once, keep them both aboard, and his cabinet in ideological balance. This famous affair is an important story in all Lincoln biographies; in this book, it has an added dimension because the reader has been told the life story not only of Lincoln but also those of Seward and Chase.

Goodwin's device of multiple biography provides that extra richness to the other big events of the Lincoln presidency: When Lincoln asks the cabinet's appraisal of the Emancipation Proclamation, the varied responses make a stronger impression than they might in a straight Lincoln biography: Bates the conservative surprisingly positive; Chase the radical surprisingly reserved; Seward, Chase's ideological opponent, surprisingly close to him on this issue.

The deeper one gets into this huge book, the more rewarding the method becomes. Knitting together these multiple stories, and making the result into an eminently readable composition, is an impressive work of writerly management.

Of what did Lincoln's "political genius" consist? Timing, certainly, but a sense of political timing draws on much more: an understanding of human nature in general and in particular; an accurate reading, not distorted by ego, ideology, or illusion. Each of the other three chief characters had defects in these regards that make Lincoln's distinction clearer.

Lincoln did commit some deeds that fit the negative stereotype of a "politician"—but from necessity and for a worthy purpose. Under the threat of the dismemberment of the Union, Lincoln condoned (even if he did not institute) the arrest of state legislators, police commissioners, a police chief, and a mayor; he suspended habeas corpus and declined to honor an order by the chief justice of the Supreme Court; he sent troops to occupy a state not in rebellion; he acquiesced in the division of an existing state on the thinnest of rationalizations; and he surreptitiously sent arms to sympathetic civilians in a state not in rebellion. These and like acts are dreadful precedents for later chief executives, but they were justified in their own time by the unique necessity of the Civil War.

During the January 1865 effort to persuade the last few Democrats to switch votes in order to pass the 13th amendment abolishing slavery—an effort in which the political president played a larger role than in any other congressional action during his presidency—there came a devastating rumor, ruinous to the chances of passage, that Southern commissioners were headed for Washington to sue for peace. When the manager of the amendment appealed to the president, Honest Abe responded with this statement: "So far as I know there are no peace commissioners in the City, or likely to be in it." In fact, there were commissioners on the way to confer with him, not headed for "the City" but for Fortress Monroe. Before they arrived the peace rumor evaporated and the amendment passed.

But being a political genius does not mean just shrewdness of maneuver and a willingness to do what you have to do. Lincoln's more distinctive qualities have in the larger sense a "political" significance, too. Goodwin emphasizes Lincoln's empathy throughout her book, and she shows that in the longer run his magnanimity and largeness of spirit had positive political results. There were figures throughout his career against whom he might have held a grudge but did not, and who would later become supporters. Edward Baker, whose followers circulated negative rumors about Lincoln's religion in a congressional contest; Norman Judd, John Palmer, and the other Democrats who prevented Lincoln from being chosen senator in 1855; Schuyler Colfax from Indiana and Horace Greeley and others back East who presumed to tell Illinois Republicans in 1858 (when Lincoln was their candidate) to roll over and let Democrat Douglas win; Salmon Chase encouraged an effort to obtain for himself the Republican nomination in Lincoln's place in 1864, and who while serving in Lincoln's cabinet undercut him. Lincoln nevertheless appointed Chase chief justice. Above all, there was Edwin Stanton who had contemptuously dismissed "that long armed gorilla" in a law case in 1855, and continued to demean Lincoln as president. Still, Lincoln appointed Stanton secretary of war. This could be said to be "politics," too—the politics of a winning generosity.

When the story reaches the terrible days of the assassination, the original cast has shrunk almost to the central two: the now dying president and the badly wounded Seward, stabbed in his home, in a separate attack, by one of Booth's fellow conspirators, Lewis Powell. (Seward's son, Fred, and two others were also wounded in the attack.) Lincoln and Seward, who had had at the start the sharpest rivalry, had become not only close collaborators but also warm friends. And Seward, lying in bed recovering from his own wounds, knew what it meant when he looked out the window and saw a flag at half mast.

**William Lee Miller,** a Scholar in Ethics and Institutions at the Miller Center, was formerly the Director of the Program in Political and Social Thought at the University of Virginia.



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# Freeh Ride

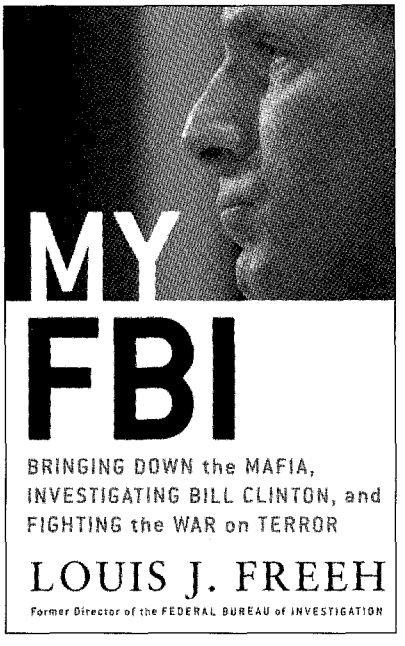
## In his memoirs, the former FBI director tries to explain away the disasters on his watch.

**By Richard Gid Powers**

Louis Freeh's *My FBI* is a time warp trip back to those happy pre-9/11 days when, as far as anyone knew, all was well at the Bureau. The trouble is, not all was well. But you won't find that out here in Mr. Freeh's memoirs, in which any mistakes his Bureau made are all laid at the door of Bill Clinton's White House.

It was easy to get Louis Freeh's FBI wrong. While he was in charge from 1993 to 2001, you went to the Quantico FBI Academy, to the Washington headquarters, to the field offices, and all you saw was talent: experienced, energetic agents and supervisors moving, it seemed, in every direction at once. If someone had a good idea, Louis Freeh would build a program around it. Visit the Hostage Rescue Team at Quantico and you would see the nation's best and brightest—and, let me tell you, some of the brawniest—wrapping their talents and lethal experience around hairy scenarios involving fast-roping from helicopters, crashing into black night-close quarters battle, and knocking off "Tangos" (terrorists) with long-range rifles. Wow. In fact, double wow.

In those days, you walked down FBI corridors and you couldn't miss the Director's ethical maxims—placards were everywhere proclaiming his bright-line policy of zero tolerance for dishonesty and his core FBI values of respect for civil liberties. In the Freeh years, FBI reports led off with homilies by the director that treated agent misconduct like the first step to the Holocaust. He was training ethical G-Men at Quantico. Agents with Ph.Ds in philosophy drilled trainees in the moral logic of Plato, Aristotle, St. Thomas, and Kant, guiding them through tricky case studies in which a failure to turn in an errant fellow agent would eventually have that sinner mitigate his punishment by serving you up for not turning him in. Wow again.




**My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror**
By Louis J. Freeh
St. Martin's Press, $25.95

You had to be impressed, amazed even, by some of the phenomenal FBI investigations of the Freeh years: Special Agent Brad Garrett dragging Mir Aimal Kasi back from Pakistan to be executed for shooting up the CIA in 1993; agents luring Ramzi Yousef from the Philippines to Pakistan and then to America to face trial and life imprisonment for the first World Trade Center bombing.

Sure there were screw-ups—the Olympic Park bombing fiasco where the Bureau spun its wheels trying to pin the crime on Richard Jewell before concluding that anti-abortion terrorist Eric Robert Rudolph was its man. There was the botched investigation of atomic scientist Wen Ho Lee, in which FBI mistakes turned a suspect widely believed to be guilty into a hero in some Asian and civil libertarian circles. There were the misplaced documents in the Timothy McVeigh Oklahoma City bombing case. And of course, Robert Hanssen. But hey, nobody bats 1.000.

I was infatuated with the Freeh Bureau, and at first 9/11 did nothing to break the spell. I was sure that, as in similar episodes in the past, a fair review would absolve the Bureau of blame for having missed signals that danger was near. Boy, was I ever wrong.

In none of its great historic cases — the gang-busting manhunts of the '30s, the atom spy cases of the '40s—did the FBI ever get the kind of breaks it got, and ignored, during the summer of 2001. True, Louis Freeh had left the Bureau on June 25 of that year, but by that time, the hijackers had all assembled and the pilots had been trained. Freeh has to bear responsibility for the politically correct obtuseness at headquarters that rejected Phoenix agent Ken Williams's plea to survey flight schools for a pattern of Middle Eastern men seeking pilot training. That would have been "ethnic profiling," and the FBI wouldn't go there. The same headquarters supervisors blocked the Minneapolis field office's investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui, a French-born Moroccan flight student agents in Minneapolis had arrested on visa violations and who was probably intended to be the 20th hijacker on September 11, 2001.

I had gotten Freeh's FBI all wrong. It was keeping its eye on everything except



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the ball—patterns of suspicious activity in communities where radical Islamists were likely to hide. But long before Freeh took over, the FBI had given up on domestic surveillance. It really deserved Richard Clarke's mordant comment that "I didn't think the FBI would know whether or not there was anything going on in the United States by al Qaeda." According to the Joint Congressional Inquiry into the 9/11 attacks, the FBI under Freeh had become risk averse and politically correct, though those tendencies had begun to appear years before Freeh took over. If I had been a faster writer, in fact, the history of the FBI that I eventually produced in 2004 would have been a hymn of praise to the great days the FBI was enjoying under Freeh. Saved by a slow pen.

Was there anyone who saw before 9/11 that things were really not so hunky-dory at Freeh's FBI? There was one voice crying in the wilderness: journalist Ronald Kessler, who charged that FBI agent morale had collapsed under Freeh and that Freeh was personally responsible for mishandling key cases. We should have paid attention, but many felt that since Kessler had almost single-handedly brought down William Sessions, Freeh's predecessor, he was just angling for another director's scalp. In fact, Kessler was right on all counts. Go back and read his two books on the Bureau after you read Freeh.

I do think you should read this book. Remarkably, Freeh is only the second FBI director to have left us his memoirs—the other was Clarence Kelley, who succeeded Acting Director L. Patrick Gray, who came after Hoover. For the record, Kelley was succeeded by William Webster, later Director of Central Intelligence, and then came William Sessions and Freeh. As for J. Edgar Hoover, his memoirs consist, as far as history is concerned, in the noxious marginalia he penned on his agents' reports dealing with the Bureau's harassment of Martin Luther King Jr.

Like a thin coat of whitewash, Freeh's *My FBI* actually highlights much of what went wrong with the Bureau under his leadership, although that was certainly not what Freeh intended. Freeh's aim was to draw a contrast between his straight arrow at the FBI and Bill Clinton's sleazy behavior over at the White House. According to Freeh, the FBI's greatest frustration during his years was the administration's resistance to the Bureau's efforts to track down the terrorists, probably Iranian, who bombed the Khobar Towers military barracks in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 Americans. Freeh accuses the Clinton administration of refusing to press the Saudis to cooperate with the Bureau because the investigation might have interfered with Clinton's efforts to improve relations with Iran. In the unkindest cut of all, he implies that Clinton solicited a Saudi contribution to the Clinton Library as a sort of payoff for not pressuring the Saudis—indignantly denied by the Clinton people.

One of the most explosive revelations of the book is Freeh's complaint that he was unable to work with Clinton because, as an officer of the law, an FBI director could not have any contact with the president "because he was already the subject of a criminal investigation." Freeh wouldn't go to the White House to watch movies with the Clintons because Clinton might be dirty. He turned in his White House pass so no one would think that he was meeting secretly with an investigation target. He didn't even want to brief Secretary of State Madeline Albright on the Chinese campaign contribution scandal, since she might pass along information on the investigation to Clinton.

Give me a break.

Look, as a person, Freeh was great, and a lot of the book (too much) is about the days before he became director when he was terrific as an agent, a prosecutor, and a judge. But it turned out that Louis Freeh, for all the fine things he did for the Bureau, was the wrong man at the wrong time to be FBI director. Clinton was president of the United States, and to paraphrase LBJ, Clinton was the only president Freeh had, whether Freeh liked it or not. For the good of the FBI and the good of the country, to say nothing of the good of the president, Freeh had to work with Clinton. If he found it violated his principles to do so, he should have resigned. He explains that if he had, "quite frankly,



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I was worried about whom he might appoint as my successor, even on a temporary basis." But if he resigned, Freeh would have been in a strong position to stop Clinton if he had tried to appoint someone unsuitable.

What we expect from Freeh's memoir is an explanation of what went wrong and kept the FBI from stopping the attacks. We don't get it. Freeh goes over the pre-9/11 events, and, while he concedes that if the Bureau had handled its leads better "then perhaps 9/11 never would have happened, or would have happened at a lesser scale," he still doesn't explain why the FBI failed.

Freeh liked to say that the Bureau was and always would be reactive, not proactive. As an American law enforcement agency, it would always obey the Constitution.

Fine and good. But under Freeh the Bureau saw its job fighting terrorism as gathering evidence after a crime and bringing the guilty to justice. After 9/11, it seems evident to everyone, but not to Freeh, that the FBI should have been proactive. The Bureau's success in bringing terrorists to justice after the fact wasn't good enough. The point was to stop those attacks from happening.

Freeh knew how to do that. He was the expert in the enterprise approach to organized crime that—in large part through his efforts—had taken down the Mafia. What was needed was the same task-force approach using foreign and domestic security agencies to understand, locate, and uproot the al Qaeda conspiracy. Freeh—and this is his most important legacy as director—had built up terrific relationships with foreign security agencies, and so he had the weapons he needed for effective intelligence against terror, overseas at least. Freeh writes that relationships between the FBI and the CIA were just fine on his watch. They were not. Walls between intelligence gathering and criminal investigations had been thrown up over the years in the Bureau and became thicker under Janet Reno and Jamie Gorelick without protest from Freeh. By the time Freeh left, there might be two agent teams working on a terrorism case—a "clean" team working the criminal side, a "dirty" team digging up intelligence—and the two couldn't share files, couldn't even talk to each other.

Since Hoover's death, the Bureau has faced a permanent opposition—in Congress, the press, and the public—that bashes the Bureau in times good or bad. Whether the Bureau deserves it or not, there are civil libertarians who feel that it is always a good thing for the country to rip the Bureau any chance they get. All that Bureau bashing may have been good for the souls of the bashers, but the consequences have been disastrous for the Bureau: The country was left, before 9/11, with an FBI that no longer wanted to gather, and was not gathering, information about potential dangers on the home front because it knew it would get its head handed to it if it was caught. Its idea of fighting terror was catching terrorists after they had done their dirty work, and preserving evidence at the crime scene for the trial, if there was a trial. Freeh essentially internalized the values and outlook of the Bureau's most extreme civil libertarian critics. When I asked a top FBI official before 9/11 what the Bureau was doing to fight terrorism, he told me, "We aren't violating anybody's civil liberties."

Not too convincingly, Freeh blames the Clinton administration for stymieing Bureau investigations with its own political correctness. Under Freeh, an ostentatious concern for morality, or at least the appearance of morality, was everywhere. After 9/11, the moral earnestness that had impressed me so much about the FBI began to look suspiciously like a one-size-fits-all excuse for taking a pass whenever a domestic intelligence investigation might get anywhere in the neighborhood of bruising anybody's civil liberties.

The question remains, why, despite a monotonously steady succession of fiascos, did Freeh essentially get a free pass from Congress, the public, and most of the press, until 9/11 made it impossible to ignore the Bureau's breakdown any longer? And why would Freeh, writing four years after 9/11 and after his Bureau had been raked over the coals by a presidential commission, a congressional commission, and several think-tank reports, feel confident that he could still claim, despite everything, that his record was, overall, a great success?

Had he been J. Edgar Hoover, we would just say, hey, he's got the goods on everyone. But people in the know, and even most not in the know, knew that Freeh's Bureau didn't have the goods on anyone, not even the people it should have.

Freeh managed to triangulate the differences between partisan Republicans and Democrats. He knew how to keep both of them off his back and at each others throats. His abhorrence of Clinton put him in good stead with the Clinton-hating Republicans, while the Bureau's campaigns against the militias and other gun nuts pleased the Democrats, who were trying to get political mileage out of linking the Republicans with violent right-wing extremists.

But the real secret to Freeh's success—PR success at least—was that he had thoroughly mastered the contemporary American penchant, especially strong in media and legal circles Freeh had to worry about, for valuing process (and good intentions) over results. Freeh may have failed more than he succeeded, but by God, he failed in the right way—with affirmative action, strict adherence to a high sounding code of ethics, and ostentatious concern for procedures and regulations, and he generally aligned himself with Bureau critics whenever the Bureau was caught screwing up, throwing up his hands and saying, what can I do with these guys? Agents used to say that whenever there was a mess, management would visit the battlefield to bayonet the wounded. Freeh evidently believed that he and the Bureau would be treated more severely for succeeding the wrong way—by using controversial methods—than for failing the right way, dotting the ethical "i"s and crossing the legalistic "t"s, no matter what the cost to the country.

And you know, he was probably right.

**Richard Gid Powers** is the author of *Broken: The Troubled Past and Uncertain Future of the FBI*, and three other works dealing with the Bureau.



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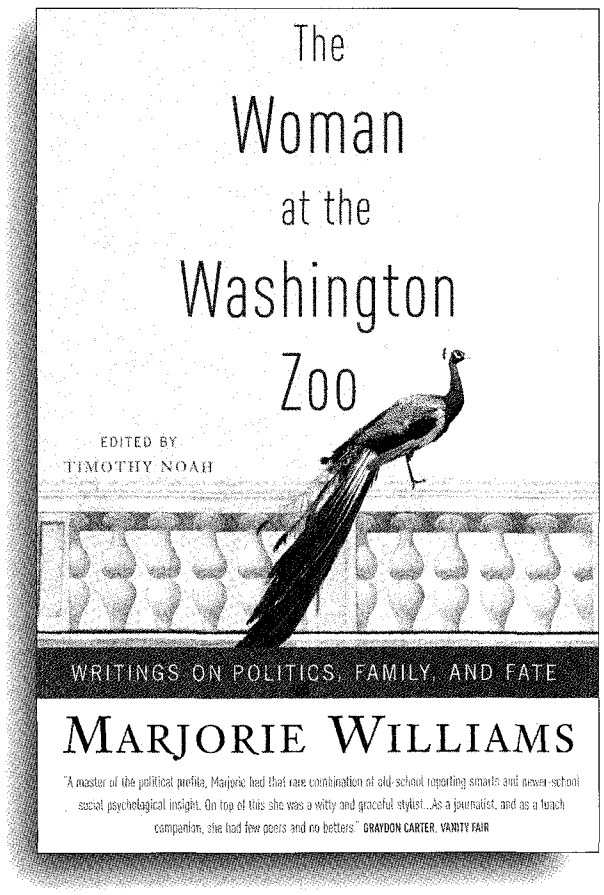


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